

# Crusade against the Killer

Bangladesh has been slow to react to AIDS like many other countries in the world. Poverty and illiteracy, however, render the country more vulnerable, thereby accentuating the need for an all-out war against the killer, writes **Fawzia Rasheed**

BANGLADESH is not the only country that has been slow to react to AIDS - but nevertheless highly likely to suffer more as a result of delays. All the classic risk behaviour exist and moreover we have, unlike other countries, the added risk that poverty and illiteracy entail. In this area, unlike most sectors, we have a positive role to play and we have the potential to do something.

First, we seem to have time and, second, we have a body of professionals who are already engaged in AIDS related work. Last, no Bangladeshi wants to die of something that can be easily prevented. Our people are certainly able to protect themselves provided that they know how to avoid infection and have access to condoms, sterile injecting equipment and so forth.

Much of the early interest in AIDS has been to the credit of the special leadership qualities of the late Major General MR Choudhury. He led the country before many others through the process of setting up the relevant committees, formulating policies and engaging the necessary sectors to start thinking about what was required. We now have an NGO STD/AIDS network which comprises over 170 NGOs. We have key Government posts who understand what is required and want to move on. So what is holding us back?

Some features that influence the process of translating plans into action in Bangladesh are listed below and in principle could probably be applied to many other areas of development.

## Reticence

Reticence is one of the hidden but real problems which holds back translating our programmes into action. We all have a fair idea of the obstacles in our own areas of work and yet we rarely speak of them. We get caught up with concerns of our profile within the community, how that agencies that employ us will react, whether we come across as being sufficiently clever and so on. It is also the custom within Bangladesh to defer to our seniors and to restrict speaking in their presence - even in professional circles. We have yet to cultivate the art of raising comment without appearing to be critical and therefore impolite. However, by not voicing our concerns, we make silent collaborators of the system failures.

**Suggestions:** A prerequisite to dealing with our concerns is surely to stimulate and accept open discussion. There are always suitable spokespersons that can be used where the situation is delicate. The existing and very significant networks in Bangladesh could be used to present a strong unified voice and/or to petition for specific action.

## Corruption

The Government is frequently blamed for not doing enough in AIDS. Corruption is often cited as being the root problem. Such attacks on Government can backfire unless it is prepared to be specific. We have a mixture of people within Government as indeed in the NGO sector - both clean and corrupt. Government staff that are potential friends to the programme can become alienated through being blamed for a



situation that they had nothing to do with and instead need help with. The irony is that everyone - including the press - recognises who these individuals are.

**Suggestions:** Perhaps this situation can not be immediately changed. However, as the funding for AIDS remains relatively small compared to other areas, increasing financial scrutiny for expenditure related to AIDS may help ward off corrupt interests and free up funds for implementation. Ultimately, competitive salaries and rigorous performance evaluation for key Government posts should be argued for - provided that those who do not perform can be moved out!

## Financial Assistance

The AIDS programme is predominantly externally funded and this has been the case for years. The programme has had a number of willing financial partners but has not been able to absorb this assistance or to tell good from bad. Irregular command of and communication between donors contributes to poor programming and competition between implementation agencies. Under the present circumstances, national coverage for targeted HIV prevention interventions will not happen without donor collaboration.

Little has been done to pursue national funding which is a serious problem as we presently have no means for sustaining the longer term expenses of this epidemic.

**Suggestions:** An attempt to get a donor consortium specifically for AIDS is worth pursuing. While coordination may not materialise in the short term, there are immediate benefits to be gained in terms of collaboration and sharing information.

Sources of sustainable national funding are urgently needed and should be investigated.

## Technical Assistance

Bangladesh is not a favoured post. The wonderful life that expats enjoyed is no more. Congestion and pollution, water and electricity shortages have finally hit Gulshan as well. Many senior positions lie vacant and take longer to fill than was previously the case. This may well partly explain the poor calibre of some expatriate technical staff. The same could of course be said for nationals. However, expatriates are generally placed into key posts and are provided specifically in order to assist the country to move forward. We have had repeated instances where senior expatriate posts have been dysfunctional and even disruptive. Much time and effort has been and is being taken to repair the damage. Bangladesh can ill afford and should not accept such mistakes. Again, reticence is part of the problem. We have had instances where the community, UN and donor agencies have been vocal to remove certain posts and yet the employers have still refused to acknowledge the problem and or have taken literally years to take action at the expense of the country.

**Suggestions:** For many areas, technical assistance should not be sought externally - particularly when the results are poor - and more so when better resources exist locally. Where additional help is required, mechanisms should exist - just as we and donors propose for Government staff, to replace those who do not perform. Technical agencies which lobby for AIDS can only be taken seriously if they dedicate quality staff for AIDS work. Similarly, the community need to help these agencies by advising them if they have made a mistake in recruitment!

**Health Sector Reform**  
The 5th Health and Population Plan for Bangladesh (in place for the past year) proposed an almost overnight restructuring exercise. This involved turning the previous system of parallel vertical health programmes (EPI, family planning, TB etc) into one seamless integrated system. Few would not agree with the rationale for attempting this, but the pace that was demanded by donors and accepted by Government has resulted in chaos and is seriously affecting routine practice. New programmes, such as those related to AIDS, for the moment do not have a chance. The reason few have noticed is that there was little happening in terms of government involvement in AIDS in the first place. However, until technical experience with STD/HIV/AIDS services exist within Government, such services can not be integrated into the larger system - at least not in the foreseeable future.

**Suggestions:** Arguing for a higher management position for AIDS within government has been tried on many occasions and would certainly help. The emphasis could alternatively be placed on a management structure which has the necessary autonomy and flexibility. This need not be the same thing. The basis for getting any movement here is ADVOCACY. Many within the Ministry of Health (which is currently where management lies) are not thinking about AIDS at all.

**Advocacy**  
Just to turn this on its head - poor advocacy on occasion has been a nightmare for the programme. Indeed, many will hold that this is partly to blame for the programme having moved several notches down from the position where it was previously secured. This story is a classic example of advocacy gone wrong.

**Suggestions:** The best advocates are drawn from those who share the same background as those to be influenced. While external help can be useful in terms of providing supporting research or negotiating power, internal advocates are necessary if we really want to change opinions or to stimulate action. Understandably, visitors who arrive to bang their fists on tables and tell people what to do are neither welcome nor effective.

## Coordinating/Funding the NGO sector

Few visitors to Bangladesh leave without being impressed by the potential of the vibrant and large NGO sector. For STD/AIDS alone, we have a network of over 170 NGOs with many others who can make a significant contribution. Both Government and the NGO community recognise that the NGO sector are and need to be in the driving seat for the AIDS programme. The policy, strategic and programme documents have given a relative priority to this sector in terms of importance and financial allocation - far beyond those of many other countries.

However, the NGO community has, on balance, made slow progress in demonstrating that their objectives are indeed to support the country with targeted behavioural change interventions. Few have portrayed the need for action on an emergency and nation-wide basis. There are many examples of

missed opportunities and indeed resistance between NGOs to collaborate. Some indicate specific reluctance to go to scale, work with Government, work outside the capital city and/or be externally monitored.

Large funds are available for the NGO sector, but unless ties are forged between NGOs to access the larger pot available through Government - each NGO will have to continue to look for independent funding. This has been the experience so far and will not result in nation-wide coverage or significantly influence the HIV epidemic.

**Suggestions:** Bangladesh has unique experience of Government working to scale with NGOs for family planning and TB. This has been achieved through formal partnerships with groups of NGOs (MOU with BPHC, BRAC and the TB NGOs). These examples, in particular, lend themselves to adaptation for AIDS interventions.

## Public Education

Very little has been done to address the long-term education needs - despite the fact that this is a prerequisite for all aspects of development - not just AIDS. Back to AIDS, IEC and media campaigns come and go, but curricula stay and have the potential to reach out to future generations before they become sexually active and consider experimenting with drugs. So far, the Ministry of Education, the NGOs (BRAC etc) and Madrasahs that provide nationwide education have not been seriously included into the AIDS programme. Some reasons include the perception that reproductive and safe-sex education are difficult areas to make progress in.

The fact that Bangladesh is a showcase for many initiatives that were considered impossible, should provide encouragement. Some examples of 'sensitive issues' addressed follow:

- i) Mosques and Madrasahs have been involved in promoting family planning for 14 years. Literally hundreds of Mullahs are trained grassroots advocates for family planning. This programme has been so successful that Bangladesh is now providing technical assistance to other Muslim countries (Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia) in this field. FPAB, who led this initiative, is now considering moving into sexual health.
- ii) It has recently been agreed that condoms can be advertised on television during later viewing hours.
- iii) BRAC has made considerable progress with AFLE.
- iv) Bangladesh has one of the most liberal policies on pornography termination in the world.

**Suggestion:** A positive mindset and more work is needed to get sexual/reproductive health education into the national curriculum. Different messages should be communicated for different age groups to make the lessons comprehensible.

We need to invest in education. Full stop.

# Of Laws and Laments

Although women are as important in the labour force as men, they are often underpaid. According a BGMEA report, 90 per cent of the workers at 2,950 garments factories in Bangladesh are women.

Unfortunately, they are the most suppressed group. There are impressive laws for protection of workers but, in reality, these are hardly enforced, and women, more often than not, find themselves at the receiving end, writes **Kathita Rahman**

WOMEN are as important in the labour force as men. Over the last few years women have increasingly become providers of productive labour, but they are still deprived of equal labour benefits. In recent years some research and discussions have taken place about the condition of working women. Although women have been subjugated in different ways, their labour is actually the foundation of a society's wealth. Several years ago women's work was not reckoned with as regard to economic activity and still now women's work remains 'unrecognised'. Women are relegated to unpaid household labour, or low-paying jobs. Practically, women remain responsible for most housework which also goes unmeasured by the system of National Accounts. When working away from home women are concentrated in low-skilled, repetitive work without formal responsibility in the organisations where they are employed and with far fewer prospects of promotion and advancement than male workers enjoy. Men have the priority over women to receive training that help them to develop skills. Women, generally, work longer hours than men but they are paid less than men and on average, women still earn only 50 to 80 per cent of men's pay. Differences in pay are particularly noticeable in certain developing countries. Like other developing countries, in Bangladesh, women earn only 42 per cent of what men earn. It is recorded by well-known statistics that women do two-thirds of the work and receive 10% of the income, but own only 1% of the world's wealth. Independent, June 1997. In this respect Mahbub ul Haq, who was the principal author of HDR said 'there is an unwitting conspiracy on a global scale to undervalue women's work and contributions to the society.' This undervaluation not only reduces women's purchasing power but it also deprives them of their legal rights.

The majority of Bangladesh women live in a state of extreme poverty. It is said that women of our country are the poorest of the poor. It is reported that a great majority of our women folk are involved in agriculture based work. In 20 districts 43.6% women primarily work in this sector. But they are not properly rewarded for their work. Today, poverty has driven more women to the city than ever before and a great number of them are nothing in the garments industry. We know that the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) was established in 1983 with 50 garment factories. Now there are 2,950 (1999) garments factory and 90% of the workers employed there are women. According to a BGMEA report, 70% of women workers are absorbed in garments industries. But then when we look into the service benefits these women are supposed to enjoy we get a horrible and disheartening picture.

The contribution of women to the flourishing of the garments sector is indisputable. The garments industry earned 2,437.81 million dollars between July, 1997 and February 1998. It is estimated that 74% of the foreign exchange of the country is earned through these industries. Given the high percentage (90%) of women workers involved in the industry it is obvious that they are the main contributors of that national income. But ironically, they are the most suppressed group. Though Bangladesh has enacted a number of impressive laws for the protection of workers concerning working environment, working conditions, compensation for accidents, lay-off, termination, maternity benefits etc, and most importantly the Factories Act 1966, Shops and Establishment Act, 1965, in practice we do not find their implementation. Garments workers are deprived even from their basic rights, like a healthy atmosphere, better sanitary facilities. The women workers are usually low paid. The main problem faced by workers is the delay or irregularity in their wage payment. According to some garment workers, various factory owners defer their monthly wage and most of the time overtime dues are not paid regularly. Moreover, the problem is not only the delay in overtime payment but also of low overtime rate. In this respect no labour policy or minimum wage rate is adhered to. Workers frequently complain that owners are very cruel and rude in handling them and women workers are the most oppressed group. Though night shift is totally prohibited under the existing Factories Act of 1965 it has been made mandatory to all garments workers, even women. Maternal Benefit Act was rectified by ILO convention 103 but the authorities are very reluctant to provide maternal leave for 3 months. There is also a rule to set up day care centre in the work place if there is more than 50 women workers in a factory. But in reality, various types of diseases like eye trouble, weakness, and headache resulting from unhygienic working environment, Sram Bikas Kendra, an NGO conducted a study on 'Health Status of Garments Workers'. They interviewed 500 garment workers of Dhaka City. The

study revealed that 30% of the women workers working in the garments industries suffered from gastric, 20% from diseases of urethra and bladder, 25% from eye related diseases and 15% suffered from regular headache. With that, death from burning also occurs in these factories due to unplanned buildings of the garment factory. But there are no medical services or life insurance provided by the authority for workers.

For most matters worse, women have to put up with sexual harassment - a very common allegation against the garment factories. Managers or supervisors commit most of these offences against innocent poor girls. Again, the female workers who work till late of night face all kinds of danger. But there is no security or transport system for night-shift women workers. It was also a research of the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS) that 84 women workers were victims of sexual harassment in 1998 and among them 54 worked in the garments sector. The research was originally based on the reports of 8 leading newspapers during the period of January-December 1998.

Women constitute the majority of the workforce in the garments industry. But the wage and a rest of the day has not risen from this group. Though there is no restriction of trade union activity in garment sector yet the workers of this sector are being deprived of this right. The owners ban any trade union activity. The owners can terminate any worker if they wish. If the workers protest against the authority's action, they fire workers from the job. This is how the workers are denied their minimum rights.

In short, women in the garments sector have not obtained equality at all. But a huge portion of our National income is coming from these industries. We do not want to exploit this sector due to such ignorance. The Government of Bangladesh has now taken some positive initiatives to continue the smooth growth of this sector. Thereby a holiday on 1st May '98 on the occasion of May Day was observed in the garment sector. It may be mentioned that in the past, most garment workers were compelled to work even on 1st May. Moreover, BGMEA and BRAC jointly declared to build 80 residential buildings Dhaka and Chittagong in order to mitigate housing problems of the garments workers.

Lastly we say that for sustainable growth, the owners have to come forward and treat workers as women but as workers. And we must stop doing injustice to workers and ensure them all benefits given by both ILO and the Constitution of Bangladesh.

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# After NGOs, NRBOs?

Recent government take-over of Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS), a non-government organisation with a purse of 25 million US dollars in foreign funding, has brought some interesting questions to the forefront. The symbolic value of such a paradigmatic shift is not to be underestimated. If history finds its way of repeating, this could be a defining moment in the structural transformation of our economic development enterprise, writes **Mahmud Farooque**

IMMEDIATELY after independence, the government of Bangladesh decided that the state should be the primary mechanism for implementing the nation's economic development agenda. However, having limited financial resources to carry out this agenda, Bangladesh was dependent on foreign aid from the very beginning. As a result, the government's primary responsibility was reduced to allocating aid money according to the policy and guidance of its international donor community, the makeup of which changed with successive governing regimes. In other words, government was on the driving seat in terms of paper, and not in terms of agenda.

By the mid 70s, attributable to a host of internal conflicts and external manipulations, a consensus began to emerge that the apparatus of the state was corrupt, inefficient and incapable of making proper resource allocations let alone manage the process of development. It was then that the international community of aid providing organizations began looking for an alternate conduit for channeling the development money. Non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh began to appear as an intermediate institution to safeguard and manage donor's money, predating their emergence in the Western nations at least by a decade.

When military dictatorship reappeared in Bangladesh during the 1980s, in addition to the inefficient and corrupt bureaucratic arguments, aid-granting governments and agencies could now impose their moral prerogative not to deal with an authoritarian regime. At the same time, leading NGOs were now able to demonstrate significant improvement in performance characteristics that was above and beyond their government counterparts. It is indeed doubtful that sans the contributions from the NGOs, the population-planning programme could have recorded the success it did. Similar arguments could also be made for other social service rendering organisations and pro-

grammes. Propelled by their own successes and increased patronage from the donors, NGOs continued to flourish during the 1980s and took command over a significant portion of the socio-economic development landscape.

By that time, net outflow of knowledge capital from Bangladesh to the industrially advanced countries had seriously depleted local repository of expert knowledge and management capabilities. Rise of the NGO movement in Bangladesh meant an increased dependency on expensive foreign consultants and some overtaxed local experts who sometimes were more interested in their own purse than solution of the problem at hand. Between the consultants that provided the expertise and the NGOs that implemented their recommendations, a mutual dependency was created, which sometimes supported studies, conferences and projects of very little or no actual significance.

## Structural Problems

From the very onset NGO was an artificial construct that was difficult to fit within the framework of contemporary democratic governance. Contemporary democratic governance begins at the top with an ideology, manifested in the national constitution. At the bottom are the morals and values embodied in the national culture that is hard to codify but implicitly understood and agreed upon by the general citizenry. Between the two are two distinct layers - institutions and civil society. The former to address government and market activities based primarily on the constitution and the latter to address the two dimensional gap between the constitution and institution, and institution and socio-cultural norms. The natural tendency is to place NGOs in the category of the civil society, as complementary to government and market institutions. The historical context contradicts this view and shows that the role of the NGOs was substitutive from the very beginning.

On the other hand, the ability to bypass the state apparatus, however convenient for the distribution and implementation of development programmes, had a basic problem, which became more pronounced as NGOs began to infiltrate every aspect of our socio-economic life. Returning to our depiction of the basic structure of a traditional democratic system of governance comprising of the state, market institutions and the civil society, NGOs carry with them a fundamental deficiency in the realm of accountability. As a non-market institution, it is shielded from predatory competition in price. As a non-governmental institution, it is also shielded from political competition, which makes governments accountable to the general citizenry. However, unlike the religious schools and the cultural organisations, NGOs are not a product of spontaneous social formation; the stakeholders here are decision-makers in foreign governments and aid granting agencies. Hence the fundamental problem of non-governmental organisation is that of accountability - they are not directly accountable to the government, the market or the people. It is true that the NGO Bureau establishes limits and operating guidelines, but the link between them and the general citizenry is tentative at best.

## Emerging Challenges

Given the historical context and structural problems, NGOs now face three fundamental challenges. First, the initial advantage in project execution came largely from the fact that NGOs were smaller in size. They were flexible, easy to move, easy to change, and quick to deploy. However, as they became larger, hierarchies needed to be imposed. Being a competitor of the government, NGOs began recruiting from the same pool as government organisations and in the process began to inherit the same organisational culture that now plagues most of our public sector institutions. Following this line of reasoning, recent takeover of GSS based on evidence of mismanagement and misuse of international donations is not terribly shocking. What is shocking is that the entity that has taken it over is the very institution that was supposed to replace it.

The fact that there haven't been many furors with the government takeover of one of the larger NGOs goes to show how the social climate has changed from that of only a decade ago. Return of the democratic government, no matter how superficial in terms of governance and how insignificant in terms of the lives of the average citizen, introduces a colossal fundamental challenge for the further growth of non-govern-

mental organizations in Bangladesh. Aid granting agencies and governments can no longer use the 'dictatorship' clause to bypass the mechanism of the state. In fact, having used such clause to promote the non-governmental sector, donors are now bound by their own logic to show their commitment to democratically elected governments. Recent consolidation by USAID of the family planning service providing NGOs have reinstated the government apparatus in the supply chain, showing a dramatic departure from the prevailing paradigm.

The third fundamental challenge for the NGOs is promulgated by technology. Proliferation of information technology now makes possible for the lost part of the brain to impose checks and balance and loosen the thread of the unwelcome dependency between expensive foreign and overtaxed local experts and their NGO counterparts. Points are now being made that the flood action programme, if implemented, would bring in more miseries in the next iteration. Points are now being made that arsenic detection equipment in use are imprecise and should be withdrawn immediately. Points are now being made that lead content of Dhaka's air is highest in the world and that TSEs and leaded gasoline should be banned immediately. In other

words, through Internet based networks of non-resident experts, a mechanism is slowly developing to curtail the virtual free ride for the handful of foreign and local consultants that supported projects of limited or no impact and indirectly contributed to the existence of inconsequential NGOs.

## Implications for Public Management

The preceding discussion have eluded to three stylised facts, which are worth summarising:

1. NGOs role in Bangladesh is substitutive and not complementary. They are not a product of spontaneous social formation and cannot be grouped in the category of civil society.
2. NGOs are a misfit for the traditional mode of governance. They are not directly accountable to the government, market, or the general citizenry. They distort the lines of control and authority and add to the complexity of an already complex system.
3. Erosion of local knowledge and expertise base due to brain drain has allowed some NGOs to contribute to a vicious cycle of unwanted dependency between them and expensive foreign and overtaxed local experts. The output of this dependency is not necessarily

leading to desirable social outcomes.

The discussion has also pointed out three fundamental challenges for further growth of NGOs in Bangladesh:

1. NGOs have lost their size advantages and are crippled by the same organization culture that plagues most public sector institutions.
2. Presence of democratic government means a reduction of unqualified donor patronage for funding of NGO operations.
3. Proliferation of information technology has created an opportunity for non-residents to scrutinise the 'expert opinions' of unqualified or uncommitted experts and impose restrictions on the dependency between them and some NGOs.

To proceed with some conjectures as what could be some interesting development in the foreseeable future, we have to begin by recognizing that NGOs appeared in Bangladesh to offer a correction to the role of the government. A change in the external context means that some NGOs have outlived their utility and need to be either absorbed in the public sector or operate as market institutions. The unattractiveness of the first option prompts one to suggest that a more active role on the part of the government is necessary in setting up the agenda for non government organizations, thus minimising the influence of donor's priorities. Having a democratic government at least on paper, allows the government the leverage to bargain on issues of national priorities. However, the lack of competency in expert knowledge could be a significant drawback in establishing such priorities with proper vision, analysis and commitments.

It could very well be the case that emerging networks of non-resident Bangladeshis organizations (NRBO) could be the missing piece for solving this puzzle. Having learnt from the NGO experience, NRBOs are refusing donor money so that they can

exercise full control over their own agenda. This could be a very positive development if it was possible to construct effective platforms so that the energy and expertise of the non-resident community could be harnessed to provide the required expertise to the government. Just like the NGOs were an essential correction to government failures, NRBOs could also be a necessary correction for the failings of the NGOs. However, goodwill alone will not be enough to overcome the structural barriers. Success of the non-resident community would depend on how much they are actually able to learn from the past experiences. After all, there still remains the structural problem of accountability and NRBOs could end up resembling the NGOs more so than the civil society.

Nevertheless, the possibility for an NRBO-led structural transformation of the economic development scene in Bangladesh is not completely unlikely. Back in 1975, who would have thought that the BRACs, the Proshikhas, the Gramreens, or the GSSs of Bangladesh would cover so much of the nation's economic development landscape? No one doubts the effectiveness and the significant contributions of many well managed non-governmental organisations. However, it is also true that there are many imitators who are not going to survive the three fundamental challenges and overcome the inherent structural problems at the same time. The rise of NRBOs and slowdown in the growth of NGOs could produce some fundamental structural transformations in the Bangladesh economy that should make the turn of the century very interesting from a public management perspective.

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