

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.

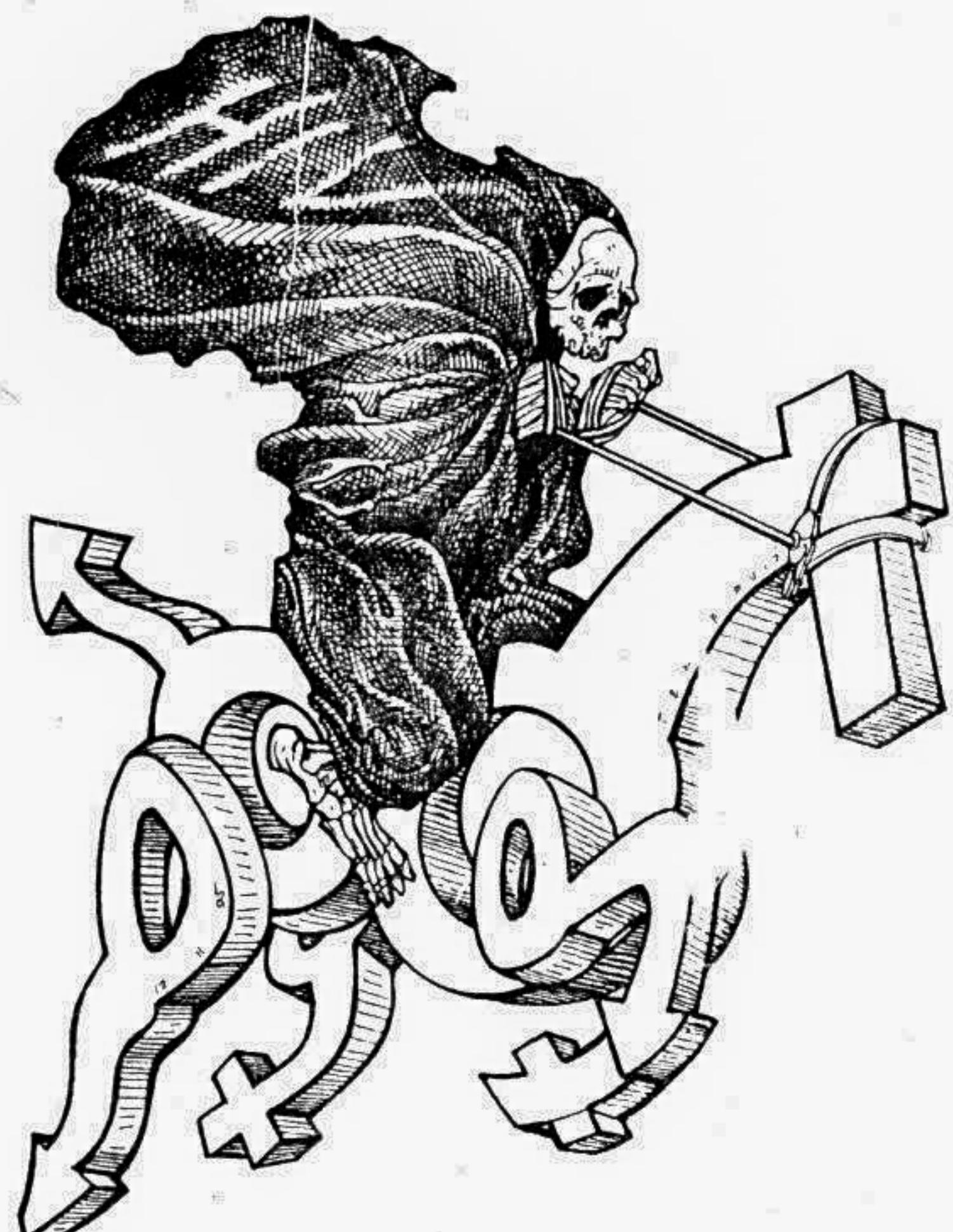
Reticence

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 the 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 our 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 become silent collaborators of the system perhaps.

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 one 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.

Health Sector Reform

The 5th Health and Popula-

Emerging Challenges

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. 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.

tion 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

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 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.

All the ground work has been done in terms of paperwork, official sanction, funding and mechanisms for government to contract NGOs for AIDS. It is up to NGOs that are interested, to study the existing, favourable documentation and come up with a plan to work together.

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 Madrasas that provide nationwide education have not been seriously included into the AIDS programme.

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.

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.

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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 both in terms of importance and financial allocation - far beyond those of many other countries.

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!

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functional 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.

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Of Laws and Laments

Although women are as important in the labour force as men, they are often underpaid. According to 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 Bangladeshi 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) garment factories and 90% of the workers employed there are women. According to a BGMEA report, 70% of women workers are absorbed in garments in

factories. There is also a rule to set up day care centre in the workplace if there is more than 50 women workers in a factory. But in reality, very few industries have actually set up such childcare centres. So workers who have children less than 6 years old remain anxious about their children's safety and it hampers their work. So although the laws look good on paper, they are not much help.

The working condition in garments factories is very unhealthy too. There are insufficient number of toilets in most factories. Many women suffer from various types of diseases like eye trouble, weakness, and headache resulting from unhygienic working environment. Srim 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 un-planned buildings of the garment factory. But there are no medical services or life insurance provided by the authority for workers.

To make 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 found in 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 trade union movements 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 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 established in the garment sector. It may be mentioned that in the past, many 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 labourers not 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.

The writer works with the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

After NGOs, NRBOs?

Recent government take-over of Gono Shahajeh 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.

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 hierarchy 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 embedded in the national culture that is hard to codify but implicitly understood and accepted 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.

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