

Poverty Eradication has to Start with "Enabling the Ultra-poor"

by Werner Kiene

The key message of "enabling development" is that we need to devise programmes which bring the poorest up to a level where standard poverty alleviation programmes have proven to be successful. What we need therefore are programmes that are focused at the poorest not from a charity perspective but from a perspective of development, i.e. with a view of "graduation" out of extreme poverty.

RELENTLESS pressure on urban space has again raised questions on the root causes of this phenomenon and on how to deal with it sustainably. In the following I do not wish to take away from the urgency for a more circumspect approach to dealing with urban poverty and I do not want to belittle existing anti-poverty programmes. However, the points that I wish to bring home are that the socio-demographic reality of this country requires a radical shift in our perception of the poverty problem and of the necessary solutions. I will show: (a) that we need to better differentiate among the poor and that it is the problem of the ultra-poor that requires foremost and direct attention; (b) that most of the ultra-poor still live in the rural areas and that more development opportunities need to be targeted there; (c) that it is not that much about the ultra-poor need but deliberate support to enable them to avail themselves of the development opportunities around them; (d) that, in spite of the magnitude of the task at hand, there are some promising avenues to enable the ultra-poor to become part of the development process; and (e) that Bangladesh and its partners can afford such a programme. I strongly believe that enabling the ultra-poor to be part of the development process is a job that can be done.

Not all poor are equally poor: The need for differentiation among the poor

Many studies on poverty in Bangladesh have been made over the past years. We seem to know so much about poverty that a recent report by the

World Bank could rightly carry the title "From Counting the Poor to Making the Poor Count". The message is correct. Indeed, we need to make the poor count. But before going much further with this essential argument, it is important to realise that the poor are not a homogeneous mass. There are considerable differences among them. Hence, which poor should count?

Bangladesh has around 125 million inhabitants. According to data provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, about half of the population lives below the poverty line which is defined as the economic capacity of average Bangladeshis to consume at least 2100 Kcal (kilo-calories). While the academic debate on the reliability of this indicator continues, it is important to note the prominence which these data give to access to food. Yet references to the 2100 Kcal poverty line hide the most dismaying fact that there is a line even further down the socio-economic ladder which divides the "Regular Poor" from the ultra-poor. People below this line can consume on the average only 1800 Kcal while nutritionists have calculated that the average Bangladeshi should have access to 2350 Kcal. This tremendous gap between what ought to be and what the ultra-poor actually can afford to eat is the real drama of human development in Bangladesh. There are 30 Million ultra-poor in this country and it appears that this number is still growing at a rate of more than half a million every year. If we look more carefully into the composition of the ultra-poor we see that, in spite of their very visible presence in Dhaka and

other major cities, most of them — around 27 million — still live in rural areas. The conclusion is obvious: the battle of helping the ultra-poor must be fought in rural Bangladesh and in small towns.

With all the attention given to poverty alleviation, why have the ultra-poor been left behind?

Looking at the growing number of ultra-poor, one is compelled to ask why in a country that is world-renowned for its innovations in poverty alleviation, there are still so many who have been left out from these success stories. One is tempted to argue that it is the sheer quantity of poor people that has led to the leaving out of so many. I disagree and would contend that it is the result of a badly understood policy process and sluggish implementation that has left these people behind. The NGO movement has produced true miracles; however, it has become increasingly evident that their lasting benefits have accrued to the "regular poor" and not to the ultra-poor. One of the main reasons seems to be the need for NGOs to be self-supporting to be able to continue their work. Economic logic but also the pressure from their erstwhile funding sources and donors has pushed NGOs to go for activities where a relatively high surplus can be gen-

erated. This surplus is definitely more easily obtained in activities undertaken with the "regular poor" than with the ultra-poor.

What is needed is another quantum-jump in socio-political awareness and creativity — similar to the boldness that catapulted the Grameen Bank, BRAC and others into our field of vision some twenty years ago. One of the first steps of such a change will have to be the political courage and organisational skill to directly address the ultra-poor and their problems and make more resources available for their development. The sources for such transfers must be sought both within the existing national budgets and from external assistance. Looking at the policies of donors, it is evident that the only way to stem the reducing trend in aid-flows is to target them better to the needs of the poorest and this is what this call for a specific and direct approach to the ultra-poor is all about.

Coping strategies of the ultra-poor as a point of departure for a new programme mix

If we want to help the poorest to develop, we need to be more aware of what families do to survive at the edge of existence. What are the coping strategies of those who on average can afford to consume only around

1800 Kilo-calories or less? Which trade-offs do they make? First and foremost is that, in spite of spending the bulk of their disposable income on food, they do not consume enough food. Second, within the family, food preference is given to the bread winner; hence the many malnourished women among the ultra-poor, the dangerously low birth-weight of their babies and the low nutritional status of young children.

All other decisions of the ultra-poor family flow from the imperative to satisfy basic food needs first before going for other needs. Having to spend almost all income on food and all attention to survival, they cannot afford to invest in the education of their children and cannot buy health and related services which would enhance their human capital for tomorrow's needs: all income and attention go for surviving today. Even if they were to see opportunities, they do not seize them because they cannot afford to take the risk that is normally associated with innovation. Finally, and most dramatic but a regular occurrence among the ultra-poor, they sell their meagre assets and go into debts.

Given the situation in which the ultra-poor find themselves, each one of these coping strategies makes sense. The trade-offs they make are rational but they do bond them to their current status for life.

The ultra poor do not need charity. But they need compassion and help that would enable them to get hold of development opportunities around them. They need help to enable them to invest in their and their children's future. They need help to enable them to hang on to their meagre assets. The concept of "enabling development" acknowledges that standard poverty eradication programmes have not succeeded with the ultra-poor. As was confirmed by (Finance) Minister Kibria in his budget speech of June 10, 1999, we have seen that these programmes have been successful for the "regular poor", but they do not reach far enough down the socio-economic ladder.

The key message of "enabling development" is that we need to devise programmes which bring the poorest up to a level where standard poverty alleviation programmes have proven to be successful. What we need therefore are programmes that are focused at the poorest not from a charity perspective but from a perspective of development, i.e. with a view of "graduation" out of extreme poverty.

What would be involved in a national programme of "enabling development for the ultra-poor"? The awareness that there is

this large number of 30 million ultra-poor should not make us loose hope. There are a few promising experiences which show that "enabling development" can work. For instance, the Vulnerable Groups Development (VGD) programme — a joint GOB-NGO-WFP initiative — enrolls almost half a million very poor women in an 18-month cycle. Food assistance given to these women coupled with some training and some credit has helped these women to "graduate" from their ultra-poverty. Their gains might look small for an outside observer, but they are very significant for those involved. Limited assistance given to them for just 18 months has indeed enabled them and their families to get hold of the development opportunities that are available in this country for the "regular poor".

Considering that each of the VGD beneficiaries is responsible for a family of three to five members, we see that with such a programme it is possible to impact on 1.5 to 2.5 million people trapped at the lowest level of poverty. Evaluations have shown that a large portion of them indeed "graduate" to a level at which they can take part in mainstream development programmes. And what is more: this mechanism has a cross-generational effect as the children of these poor have a better chance not to be ultra-poor.

It bears repeating that the most important element in these experiments is that there has to be a focus on "enabling development". Charity and handouts are not the message to the ultra-poor but also to the funders of such programmes. Of great importance

is also the recognition that it is not just one input that leads to success. In the context of Bangladesh, food assistance is definitely an important ingredient for a successful "enabling strategy"; however, we have seen it repeatedly that food alone is not enough. A minimum "package" which includes some awareness raising, some practical training, and where needed some credit, is needed to get the "enabling process" started.

How much would it cost to enable the ultra-poor?

Again, extrapolating from the VGD programme, we see that covering a beneficiary for 18 months to enable her or him to participate in regular development activities cost about US\$150 to US\$250. Without claiming any precision, one could estimate that among the 30 million ultra-poor there would be approximately six million households. The total of supporting them through an "enabling development" approach would be not more than 1500 million US dollars. Thinking of such a programme as a ten-year effort, it would involve an annual budget of up to 150 million US dollars. Some of this amount could come from reorganising existing allocations. The rest must be new resources. We certainly are not talking about a negligible amount of money but enabling the 30 million ultra-poor to become part of the mainstream development process would definitely be more efficient than repairing the consequences from continuing to leave them out.

The author is Representative, World Food Programme, to Bangladesh

Hazardous Waste Management: Problems and Issues

MANAGING the flow of hazardous wastes in our society includes a complex series of tasks, beginning with source control and continuing through final disposal and recycling. Each activity entails considerations in policy, administration, science and technology, and information flow areas, and requires integration of expertise from many disciplines in the government and private sectors. As the problems of hazardous waste proliferation mount, developing and setting priority actions that will help minimise these problems have become increasingly urgent. Actual flow of hazardous substances into the environment as a result of both planned processes and accidental releases and their adverse biological impacts must be taken into consideration for any effort on waste management.

Tens of millions of tonnes of toxic and hazardous substances enter the environment every year as unwanted wastes. Increase of toxic wastes in the river reduces its ability to hold dissolved oxygen, thereby affecting the aquatic ecosystem. As a consequence, critical situations have arisen in the Buriganga over the years. Depending on the type of industries involved, their waste could be a combination of organic materials, petroleum products, metals and so on. Textile and printing companies use a lot of dye. Each industry will need its own unique treatment plant to treat the kind of waste it releases. Thus, older industries without own wastewater treatment plants or using inadequate backdated ones will continue to

pollute. Organic waste is biodegradable. However, to biologically degrade, an organic substance requires oxygen. When a particular watercourse has too much organic waste to handle, depleting its supply of oxygen, then it is impossible for the waste to degrade. The addition of other chemicals further deteriorates the situation.

Another example is when heated water is released back to the source, if significantly changes water temperature. This increases the metabolism of aquatic organisms. Plant life, for instance may be altered, and animals with specific food habits may be eliminated, because the warm water supports different food organisms. Although an increase in temperature of a few degrees may not seem significant, some aquatic ecosystems are very sensitive. Many fishes are triggered from spawn by temperature changes. Other than that, toxic wastes pose a serious health risk to humans.

Toxic substances enter the effluent stream as by-products in significant quantities at both the stages of processing and manufacturing. Tanneries at Hazaribag are disposing tons of toxic chemicals directly into the Buriganga ignoring environmental laws and regulations. The adverse impact on the eco-system, improper implementation of environmental laws and lack of monitoring are the major causes of inadequate hazardous waste management (HWM) practices at the disposal stage.

Products made with hazardous substances — ranging from aerosol sprays to indus-

Tens of millions of tonnes of toxic and hazardous substances enter the environment every year as unwanted wastes. Lack of proper monitoring and unchecked disposal of toxic substances into the water bodies has further deteriorated the situation, writes **Shahriar Shams**

trial cleaning fluids — pose potential health threat to users. Effective management of hazardous and toxic materials becomes difficult at the use stage because of the wide dispersion of the substances among the population. The principal metals that can be hazardous are arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, iron, lead, manganese, mercury, nickel, silver and zinc. Mercury discharging from a chemical plant in Japan was taken up by fish and deaths as well as serious disablement followed when local people extensively used the fish as food.

A major problem in controlling flow of toxic substances is that intimate relationship between problems of toxic and non-toxic materials flow is not recognised. Consumers have little idea of toxic substances that are produced during manufacturing of the products they buy and, hence, have little power to buy the "least toxic" product.

A top priority in hazardous waste management is to integrate materials flow programmes so that opportunities to minimise or eliminate toxic and hazardous components of materials flow can be enhanced.

The most obvious way to minimise the risks of exposure to toxic substances is to minimise physical flow of these substances. Source reduction

from consumers in maximising materials life are all viable mechanisms for reducing the magnitude of the source flow of toxic materials. Source reduction must become a top priority

in our efforts to manage toxic and hazardous materials. The fewer toxic materials we release into the environment, the less risk they pose and the less it will cost to dispose them. Up to

a 25 per cent reduction of the per capita waste generation rate can be achievable through increased awareness and commitment by the public and industries. The filed of source reduction, however, is in its infancy. Incentives for the producer to radically change processing designs to reduce the quantity and harmful quality of toxic materials are lacking.

To date, few substantive efforts in hazardous waste management have been geared toward genuine source reduction. Recovery of resources is obviously a preferred method of waste management, but unfortunately it is severely limited in practice by economic considerations. Recovery is aided by keeping waste streams segregated and as concentrated as possible. In some cases the recovered product may be reused directly in the process. Examples are copper and nickel recovery from metal finishing processes; the recovery of oils, fats, and plasticizers by solvent extraction from filter media such as activated carbon and clays; and acid recovery by spray roasting, iron exchange or crystallisation. Waste with high calorific value, such as oils, solvents, and liquid tarry wastes, may also be used as a fuel supplement to recover their energy content.

Thermal treatment by incineration is the obvious way of

List of hazardous wastes
Arsenic, arsenic compounds
Mercury, mercury compounds
Cadmium, cadmium compounds
Thallium, thallium compounds
Beryllium, beryllium compounds
Chromium VI compounds
Lead, lead compounds
Antimony, antimony compounds
Phenols, phenol compounds
Cyanides, organic and inorganic
Isocyanates
Organic-halogen compounds, excluding inert polymeric materials and other substances referred to in this list or covered by other directives concerning the disposal of toxic or dangerous waste
Chlorinated solvents
Organic solvents
Biocides and phyto-pharmaceutical substances
Tarry materials from refining and tar residues from distilling
Pharmaceutical compounds
Peroxides, chlorates, perchlorates and azides
Ethers
Chemical laboratory materials, not identifiable and/or new, whose effects on the environment are not known
Asbestos (dust and fibres)
Selenium; selenium compounds
Tellurium; tellurium compounds
Aromatic polycyclic compounds (with carcinogenic effects)
Metal carbonyls
Soluble copper compounds
Acids and/or basic substances used in the surface treatment and finishing of metals.

destroying the toxicity of certain hazardous and combustible wastes. It is the recommended method of disposing chlorinated hydrocarbons, oils, and solvents, which cannot be recovered, oil contaminated with cyanide, acid tars, and formulated pesticides if they cannot be used. Considerable flexibility in operation is required to handle a wide range of industrial wastes, including liquids and pumpable sludges, thermoplastic solids, conventional solids such as cardboard and wood and drummed material.

Landfill is currently the most widely practised method of disposing hazardous wastes. Recent research results suggest that a properly selected and managed landfill site may represent an acceptable disposal route for perhaps the majority of such wastes. However, landfill is obviously not applicable to all wastes, and each case should be judged on its merits. In general, three factors need to be considered when assessing the suitability of a specific waste for disposal at a particular landfill site:

- Possible adverse effects on the subsequent use of the reclaimed land
- The potential for polluting either surface or groundwater resources
- Very high priority has been placed on the difficult task of siting hazardous waste disposal facilities. Geological and political constraints have made finding and developing adequate repositories for our growing hazardous waste extremely difficult.

Siting is a complex problem, involving public education and political manoeuvring as well as sophisticated engineering. To ease siting problems, greater attention must be given to methods that will reduce the volume of waste. The first priority as discussed is source reduction. The second is the physical reduction of waste volume which can be achieved through alternative disposal system that do not require long term burial and recycling hazardous wastes.

Safe and economic disposal of increasing quantities of hazardous wastes is a problem facing most industrial countries. Currently most of these wastes are deposited on land, and for financial reasons alone this situation is likely to continue for some time to come. Recent research on the behaviour of hazardous wastes in landfill sites have shown that with proper management and site selection, most wastes can be satisfactorily disposed in this manner. Handling and disposing of waste sludge, waste liquids and hazardous materials shall be given special consideration with regard to water pollution and the health and safety of the employees. Science of hazardous waste management is just beginning to emerge from the Dark Ages. Much remains to be done to further our understanding of the behaviour of waste materials in the environment.

The writer is a research assistant at the Department of Civil and Structural Engineering, University Kebangsaan, Malaysia

Lamenting the Lost Opportunities!

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

With an intelligent and educated mass ordinary people may be able to do extraordinary things. Only with an educated work force we may be able to take advantage of the blossoming opportunities in the dawn of the next millennium. Shouldn't we prepare our folks for that magical moment?

WHEN real opportunities knock the door, should we sit around lazily and do nothing? Instead, we should seize the moment and do what ever is necessary to take advantage of the opportunity. For Bangladesh, those elusive opportunities came by one after another. However, what did our leaderships do? You know the answer very well. Let us examine what those opportunities meant for our motherland and how we lost out? However, before I delve into this subject matter allow me please to narrate a very short story, which has a strong take-home message — a pithy comment, may I say?

The story's backdrop is obviously not Bangladesh; although, the main characters, the mosquitoes, abound our motherland. A male and a female mosquito just hatched from larvae on a windy summer day. The wind was so strong that the new mosquitoes with their tender wings could hardly keep up in the air; let alone fly. They were literally swept away by the gust of the wind. Luck had favoured the newly-hatched creatures. Soon they ended up in a nudist colony. Looking at all the exposed bodies, the mosquitoes were salivating. They thought a feeding frenzy would commence anytime soon. However, as it

turned out the mosquitoes were not too anxious about getting down to the business of biting and sucking blood. After a while, the female mosquito broke the silence. She said to the male mosquito, "Why aren't you biting, honey?"

The male mosquito quipped, "My sweetheart, as a mosquito I know darn well what I am supposed to do. But can't you see there are too many of them out here... I just can't decide who should I bite first?"

"Me, either," replied the female mosquito. As the mosquitoes were doing the sweet-talking, a strong wind happened to sweep through the area. Before realizing that a great opportunity of feeding bonanza had all but vanished, the bugs landed in a barren place, miles away. Both of the mosquitoes looked at each other. The eager-to-talk female mosquito again broke the silence. She said, "We lost an opportunity of a lifetime. I suppose," "Yep, yep," replied her companion.

The moral is when opportunities present themselves — don't just sit on, do something. Or else you'll talk about it for rest of your life. In angst-ridden Bangladesh, I surmise we had such opportunities in late 1971 and early 1972. Nonetheless, the whole nation just sits tight

and we let the opportunity slip by right before our eyes. Again, in 1991 and 1996 we thought the country was in a position to take advantage of new opportunities engendered by political changes sweeping throughout the nation. But we failed again.

Right after establishing the new nation in late 1971, the entire population in brand new Bangladesh was united except for a few. People's morale was very high and they were willing to sacrifice whatever little they had to build the nation. But, do you think the leadership of the nascent republic was too eager to tap the raw energy and vitality of our people? Until this day, I simply repent knowing that our leaders lost an excellent opportunity to start a new beginning. All supreme leader had to do at the time was give a clarion call for national unity. Instead, he seemed busy with politics. There was infighting among Awami League's high commands. Some leaders were outright socialist; some were capitalist. Sheikh Mujib was neither a socialist nor a capitalist. He was a populist. He was a

charismatic leader. All his life he fought for the autonomy of the downtrodden Bengalis. The moment the country got independence, the short-term goal was realized, however, the supreme had some clue as to where the country should be heading. But he also failed to seize the moment.

In 1972, word got leaked out in the Western press that Bengalis suffered immensely during the historic nine-month period in 1971. When the news of the Bengali genocide surfaced in the Western press, people showed their sympathy by showering relief goods through humanitarian organizations. The new government of Bangladesh received over a billion dollars worth of relief goods. But I hate to say that quite a high percentage of those relief goods was sold in the open market in a short order, we lost for nation building. The nascent country's hope for building a new society was evaporating very fast.

The period 1975 through 1991 was more like a big slum-

ber for of the young nation of Bangladesh. The nation was given a new potion to drink by the charlatans from the military barracks once most senior leaders of Awami League were zapped. First, the constitution of the new republic was maimed. Second, religion was brought back to the forefront. Under those circumstances, the new opportunities to broaden our minds had all but exited. Let's not delude ourselves by saying that we did not capitalize on new opportunities. Because, for civilians there were no new opportunities. The military had provided opportunities to their own people. Needless to say during 1976-1981 as the young nation suffered, a nouveau riche class emerged. This very powerful class who was both young and restless was extremely loyal to the General.

The other charlatan who also stilled any new opportunities to show up in the public domain of Bangladesh from 1982 through 1991 was a Lieutenant General then. He took control of the government forcibly and made sure that all

the opportunities only showed up for himself and the few other people who encircled him to form a new political party. Like the past seven years, a powerful oligarchy ruled the nation for nine years. The General funded a good chunk of his misbegotten wealth to the West. The remnant of which after all these years can still be found in the west-coast of America subsidizing the opulent lifestyle of the general's kith and kin. The shiny Mercedes Benz at the doorstep, all too frequent trips to exotic places taken by the beneficiaries of H.M. Ershad raise the eye brow of some Oreganians but then no one really asks — how did the general stifle the new opportunities for the people of Bangladesh?

When the whirlwind of democracy was sweeping over the nation during 1989 through 1991, Bangladesh got the tail end of it in 1991. We all thought that new opportunities will mushroom all over Bangladesh under the aegis of democracy. But the then Opposition put a formidable roadblock to any growth opportunities by calling

those reckless hartals. Except for a few die-hards BNP supporters all will agree that Awami League came to power through a fair election in the summer of 1996. We finally thought that this was going to usher a new glasnost into our political landscape and opportunities will have sprung up all over the country in no time. But the ever elusive opportunities did elude us again. What is going on this time? Well, the terrible spectre of hartal reared its ugly face ever more blatantly when the party in power earlier became an opposition party. I suppose this is all being done in the name of retribution.

Do you think new opportunities will show up in Bangladesh anytime soon? You may not be that optimistic as long as we have rivalry between two feuding political families who have a common denominator — overbearing pride and arrogance. One is out there to tell the impoverished folks how outstanding her father was during the heydays of 1972 through 1975. The other is too eager to tell the masses that had not it been for her husband the country would now be part of India. Occasionally, they would shed tears to sway the minds of simple-minded common people. But again, this is the provenance of South Asian politics. The ob-

scurant politicians of our land would dread to see intelligent constitutions all over Bangladesh. Their days of easy vote getting would be over a hurry if only we could educate our masses.

Yes, until and unless we can educate our masses, I do not see any hope of ridding the status quo. So, there should be an intense lobby on the government to put more money in primary education. For the politicians, though, it is a catch-22 situation. Tell me, which political party would like to dismantle a system that has worked to suit their interest for so long? I presume then the education must be a dreadful word in the lingo of politicians. But sugarcating might work here. Can some erudite pundit tell me please, how we could persuade our politicians to open up more primary schools?

With an intelligent and educated mass ordinary people may be able to do extraordinary things. Only with an educated work force we may be able to take advantage of the blossoming opportunities in the dawn of the next millennium. Shouldn't we prepare our folks for that magical moment?

The writer is a senior research scientist in biotechnology; he writes from New Orleans, USA.

