

Towards Food Security

What is meant by food security? Undoubtedly, access of each individual member of a household to adequate food (individual food security) to be ensured presupposes access of the household to adequate food, given the household composition (household level food security); and food security for all households to be ensured presupposes availability of sufficient food for all citizens of the country (national level food security).

If large numbers of people in a country are constrained to eat less than adequate food, the most basic of the basic needs of each individual, there is a fundamental development challenge that the country faces in addition to the moral and ethical quagmire that such large-scale deprivation entails. The longer the challenge remains unresolved, the more entrenched it may become, adversely impacting on the nation-building process on a continuous basis. In Bangladesh since Liberation in 1971, the goal of poverty alleviation and ensuring food security for all has been stated in successive plans and policy pronouncements. But the problem is still pervasive and deep-seated as ever. It is not more so.

Food and Food Security

What is food? In Bangladesh, the common perception is that food essentially means food-grains, mainly rice. This is the staple food in this country, and the large majority of the population traditionally derives most of the nutrients by consuming rice. More recently wheat is also consumed by some people, but usually not by choice. Fish is the most important source of animal protein for Bangladesh's population. Cattle and poultry meats are however consumed occasionally by the poor majority, although routinely by the rich minority. Vegetables are not ordinarily considered to be 'food' proper, but as items to be fried or curried and mixed with rice to make rice more consumable. But in nutrient terms, the usually desirable food basket consists of different food items (grains including pulses, vegetables and fruits, milk and milk products, oil, sugar, fish, meat) to be consumed in such a combination as would provide different nutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, fats) in a balanced manner. But, a question arises as to whether an individual needs all the different types of foods because many people who are pure vegetarians live fully healthy, active and productive lives.

It is a common practice to measure poverty and undernutrition in a country with reference to a daily calorie-intake level (the total caloric value of carbohydrates, proteins and fats consumed from various food sources) worked out on the basis of food habits, physical characteristics, age and sex distribution and activity profile of the people concerned. The approach essentially implies standardisation of the

'consumer person' in terms of calorie-intake level, taking into account the above mentioned and other relevant characteristics.

But this approach of using a reference total daily calorie-intake figure per person has well known limitations, arising from, for example, inter-individual differences in metabolic functioning in converting foods consumed into nutrients as well as from intra-individual variations over time in this regard. Also, as the same total caloric value can be derived from consuming different food baskets consisting of different quantities of different food items including all vegetarian meals, a further complication may arise as to which basket is suitable for which individual for the best possible results. Does food habit play a key role regarding who needs what food basket?

However, the average daily per person calorie-intake figures, usually provided by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), for different countries are a useful starting point for poverty and nutrition analyses, particularly in countries like Bangladesh where poverty is so pervasive and deprivation so visible. For Bangladesh, currently absolute poverty and hard-core poverty lines are respectively defined with reference to 2122 Kcal and 1805 Kcal per person per day.

What is meant by food security? Undoubtedly, access of each individual member of a household to adequate food (individual food security) to be ensured presupposes access of the household to adequate food, given the household composition (household level food security); and food security for all households to be ensured presupposes availability of sufficient food for all citizens of the country (national level food security). But, the converse is not true. That is, national level food security does not automatically ensure household level food security for all households nor does the household level food security ensure food security for each of its members, because of distributional problems.

The World Bank defines food security as "access for all people at all times to safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life". This implies that there is a sufficient supply of quality food, stabilized throughout the year, with guaranteed access for all to adequate food. The mechanisms

of ensuring a sufficient supply of food are domestic production, imports, and food aid; the relative importance of each component would vary according to the prevailing relevant circumstances in the country concerned. The stability of food supply would require the maintenance of appropriate quantities of food stocks by procuring supplies at harvest times for release to the market in the agricultural lean seasons, as necessary. The issue of guaranteed access for all to food has to do with access to the means of production and/or to employment on the one hand and fair distribution of food within the family on the other. In so far as the quality of food is concerned, appropriate standards need to be maintained relating to processing, preparation, and contents of meals.

When one talks about food security, one is really talking about people whose access to food is inadequate in terms of quantity, quality or both due to inadequacy or lack of access to the means of food production and/or to productive employment and also about those who may be currently food secure but can suddenly face food shortages due to a small disruption in the production or in the distribution system or in employment prospects due to natural or human-made causes. They include landless agricultural labourers, artisans, small and marginal farmers, fishermen, and rural non-farm and urban informal workers. The rich and resourceful people not only can manage their own affairs but in fact accentuate economic difficulties and food insecurity of the poor and the economically weak by appropriating to themselves unduly large shares of available economic opportunities and food supplies at times of actual or threatened slumps/shortages. The food consumed is expected to be safe and nutritious.

According to official statistics the absolute poverty ratio has virtually remained unchanged at 47-48 per cent since 1988/89. And card-core poverty afflicts slightly less than a quarter of the population. Translated into numbers, over 60 million people are currently absolutely poor. The number is larger by about six million

compared to 1991/92 (54 million) as a result of population increase. Out of the 60 million or more poor people, the hard-core poor currently account for an estimated 30 million -- this number however is somewhat lower compared to say, 1991/92. But 30 million is a huge number of extremely food vulnerable people. Also, the remaining 30 million or so of the absolutely poor people suffer from food insecurity of various degrees.

Moreover, there are millions more who are just above the absolute poverty line, but whose food security is fragile and may be jeopardised as a result of a slight disruption in food production, food distribution, or employment prospects due to natural causes or otherwise.

names. And one cannot even begin to do that without reference to an overall framework to guide the integration of the approaches to the various components of the process. In this context, the obvious starting point seems to be to specify the overall vision in terms of sustainable human development, which involves socio-economic aspects on the one hand and environmental considerations on the other. In terms of goals, broadly speaking, the key ones are poverty alleviation, ensuring food security, sustained economic growth, and environmental protection and enhancement. Towards constructing the proposed strategic, sustainable development pathway all the goals need to be pursued simultaneously through political, social, market, procedural (ethics, equity) and 'safety nets' (for most vulnerable) processes. Policies and programmes need to be geared to that end.

In Bangladesh, a critical factor underlying both socio-economic and environmental aspects is the widespread and deep-seated social inequality. The poor and the disadvantaged constitute the large majority who have very limited access to both the means of production and employment (purchasing power) and are by large excluded from participation in governance. They also suffer from limited human capability in terms of education, training and health. This all pervasive inequality in the country is in fact the root cause of poverty; hence, sustained poverty alleviation and, consequently, sustainable human development, is not possible unless the promotion of equity encompassing various aspects such as social, economic, and governance is a systemic concomitant in the strategy.

On the other hand, the power elite, who constitute a small minority, are highly privileged in terms of not only human capital, social, market, procedural (ethics, equity) and 'safety nets' (for most vulnerable) processes. Policies and programmes need to be geared to that end.

In Bangladesh, a critical factor underlying both socio-economic and environmental aspects is the widespread and deep-seated social inequality. The poor and the disadvantaged constitute the large majority who have very limited access to both the means of production and employment (purchasing power) and are by large excluded from participation in governance. They also suffer from limited human capability in terms of education, training and health. This all pervasive inequality in the country is in fact the root cause of poverty; hence, sustained poverty alleviation and, consequently, sustainable human development, is not possible unless the promotion of equity encompassing various aspects such as social, economic, and governance is a systemic concomitant in the strategy.



Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

The Approach towards Ensuring Food Security for All

The food problem in Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon. It has existed over the past decades and centuries. The problem at present is so pervasive that it will be a very tough act to eliminate it, even to substantially alleviate it over the next 5 or 10 years. In reality, given the nature and magnitude of the problem, it cannot be addressed properly in isolation from larger social and economic contexts of the country. It is indeed a long-term problem; and when one talks about the future, the long-term starts with the immediate and then proceeds into the future. An appropriate overall approach must, therefore, be to recognise the immediate situation and construct the strategic, sustainable pathway with reference to possible future scenarios projected by taking into account in an integrated fashion the present realities and future prospects in respect of not only the food economy but also larger social and economic dy-

South Africa after Apartheid

Gemini News Service correspondent Gavin Evans returns to South Africa to see how his old friends from the days of struggle against apartheid have fared under majority rule. He writes from Cape Town.

Survivors of the struggle



Mkhulisi Jack: 'No revenge'



Brett Myrdal: 'I still cry'



Murphy Morobe: 'Abnormal existence'



Janet Cherry: 'Absence of fear'

"Before, it was a question of throwing yourself into the revolution with no gain, but when Mandela was released, I said, 'My goodness, I was in politics by default. I wanted a new challenge. I knew nothing about business but I thought I could create jobs."

Today the 43-year-old Mkhulisi works in construction workers. It is a dusty close to his heart. "When I was a child we were told that blacks were less intelligent than whites, and we thought it true because we were living in shacks, but now you can't tell that to my children. We are living everywhere."

A few miles down the road I had supper with 38-year-old Janet Cherry on the five-acre smallholding she shares with "two horses, one donkey, two dogs, two cats, one partner and one child." We first met 20 years ago, when we were inspired by idealism, adventure and hormones, struggling together in strike support committees, student structures, and an ANC underground unit, and later shared a cottage in Port Elizabeth. I moved to Johannesburg while she soldiered on, teaching literacy to workers, surviving several spells of solitary confinement, a year in "emergency" detention and a couple of murder attempts.

Her turning point was 1990: "I'd lived under intense paranoia and I remember thinking I wouldn't be prepared to have a child while the ANC was

banned, so it was an enormous relief to rediscover personal freedom and an absence of fear. My quality of life improved dramatically. I felt stable for the first time in years and it was a great relief to find I could think independently again."

She had a son, rekindled her passion for horse-riding, found a new one in mountaineering and accepted a post as a political science lecturer before being recruited as a researcher for the Truth Commission to investigate human rights abuses committed by the ANC. She was shocked by what she discovered.

"I felt I'd been part of an organisation responsible for some terrible acts. After that there was no way I could go back into the ANC because I knew too much of what went on."

In Cape Town I connected with my old school classmate, Brett Myrdal. A surfer, mountaineer and scientist, he went into exile in Zimbabwe after refusing his army call-up, only to be snapped up by the ANC for a military officer's course in East Germany. He received further training in the Soviet Union, spent time in Angola and Zambia, seriously injured his back in a military exercise, almost died of malaria, and operated as a military commander. But after returning to South Africa six years ago he became a recluse.

I went to a psychologist who asked how I felt, but all I did was just cry for an hour. I had

extreme difficulties adapting, with an enormous need to find people who'd understand what I'd been through."

He was offered a colonel's posting in the new army, and toyed with it "for the crazy reason that I wanted recognition." Instead, he found meaning in life through fatherhood and a job transforming migrant workers' hostels into flats, and has since moved on to his "dream job", co-ordinating the environmental Table Mountain Fund and setting up biodiversity projects in the Cape Town area.

But his past still haunts him: "If I think of the people I loved in exile who didn't come back or ended up with nothing, I still cry. Very few skimmed the political cream. The others were destitute, became criminals, alcoholics, junkies, and it makes me sad."

How did he cope? "Back to the sea. There's nothing more exciting than slipping into that sensation of waves pouring overhead. If I can get a good surf on the weekend my week is made."

Finally, I shared dinner in Hout Bay with another old comrade, Alan Roberts. Raised as one of nine children of a "coloured" community matriarch in Mafikeng, he had "no politics beyond a hatred of whites" until 1975 when he was "beaten to a pulp" by the police for leading a strike, after which he joined the ANC in Botswana.

We met in Cape Town in the early 1980s and we later shared

a slum hovel in Johannesburg at a time when he was the national organiser of a trade union.

He reminded me of his clandestine activities -- witnessing the downside of socialism while being trained in a military camp in the Soviet Union, bringing arms into the country, surviving spells of solitary confinement and torture.

Freedom, however, did not treat him well. His wife died, then a brother died of AIDS, followed soon after by another brother from a heart attack. A lull in this sequence allowed him to study at Oxford but within a year he was called home to help the ANC's 1994 election campaign, despite turning down the chance to become an MP. "I couldn't take the mental shift. The leap to parliament would have been too dramatic for me."

On the eve of the election, his 14-year old son was paralysed by a riot policeman's dum-dum bullet. Then his two-year-old son drowned in a swimming pool. A year later his sister was killed in a car crash.

The cost of disaster relief forced him to leave his post as a trade union leader and accept a job as Land Commissioner for the Western and Northern Cape, which involves resettling past black inhabitants on white-occupied land.

He admits he has not coped well with the peace. "In the struggle there was no routine and we were always filled with fear. Not knowing if someone was going to scrape you off the street the next day, I didn't get into serious relationships or acquire possessions because my lifestyle was organised around revolutionary activity, but I had a sense of purpose, though I always imagined that if I made it to old age I'd be sitting on a paint tin, calling the kids to go borrow a cigarette because I couldn't afford it."

Today, at 47, he says he is "doing it right" with his baby daughter, Emma, and sees a bright future for her.

To which our mutual friend Brett Myrdal added: "My hope is that the next generation will grow up free from apartheid psychosis. That's an enormous hope."

The author is a writer and freelance journalist currently based in London.

lation, globalisation) package, emphasis on social sectors (education, training, health, gender issues), reforms aimed at establishing good and effective governance (administrative reforms, institutionalisation of democracy, improvement of transparency and rule of law, removal of corruption), focus on environmental protection and enhancement, and 'safety nets' for the most vulnerable. But, poverty alleviation has not been incorporated in the strategy as a direct goal. It is supposed to be achieved via the so-called, often inconsequential 'trickle down' effects.

However, there are certain anti-poverty oriented programmes being implemented in the country. But these are mostly in the nature of temporary measures or tied to rudimentary economic activities. Hence, their impact has been limited and often transient. The issue of inequality which is as noted earlier is all-pervasive and increasing, that is the root cause of poverty, is not addressed up front, although emphasis on social sectors aimed at improving the capability of the people at large is a measure to that end. Given that the problem is not only acute but also accentuating further in the wake of free market reforms, more direct action on it is necessary, as the reform process is pursued, by way of steps towards appropriately improving the access of the poor and the disadvantaged to social, economic and governance opportunities.

It has been mentioned earlier that poverty has been persisting at about the same level of 48 per cent since 1989/90. Economic growth also has not accelerated; an average annual growth rate of 4.8 per cent has been achieved during the 1990s, which is about the same as that achieved in the 1980s or 1970s. The relatively higher average economic growth rate of 5.5 per cent during 1995/96-1998/99 compared to the first half of the decade (4.1 per cent) has been due to the much larger contribution of agriculture during 1995/96-1998/99 (growing at an annual average rate of 4.4 per cent) compared to the earlier period (about 1.0 per cent). The higher agricultural growth rate during 1995/96-1998/99 has been, among other things, importantly due to the support (in terms of subsidies and support prices) provided to the agricultural sector by the government despite the fact that reform conditionalities are against such support.

Two other points need to be noted. A precipitous tariff reduction in the early 1990s in fulfillment of aid conditionalities, with the process also continuing since then, has created severe adverse market conditions for the domestic production vis-a-vis foreign competition. In so reducing tariff rates, the ground realities were totally ignored; and no time and support were allowed to domestic production to acquire a capacity to withstand the onslaught. The pace and pattern of tariff reduction should have been designed keeping the prevailing realities in focus. Obviously that was not done. It is now necessary to seek ways of putting things in order for the economy to acquire the necessary strength to make appreciable headway in the face of stiff foreign competition. The other point is that the pervasive corruption and the debilitating bureaucratic hindrances have continued to jeopardise the crucially necessary reforms in governance and financial management.

Clearly, therefore, the overall strategy needs to be readjusted in the light of the realities on the ground. That is, poverty alleviation should be inducted in the strategy as a direct goal and equity incorporated as an overarching process concomitant. Tariff and economic support/incentive structures need to be properly revised and reoriented and corruption and bureaucratic hindrances need to be addressed with full political commitment. The strategy will, then, become conducive to a harmonious progress of the society, implying that peace, stability, growth, poverty alleviation, social equity, and environmental enhancement can all be simultaneously promoted. Indeed, such a conducive macro framework is needed for the policies and activities concerning various aspects of the economy and society implemented in various spaces (local, national, international) to add up to produce the best possible results in relation to the key national goals just listed. Ad-hocism and piecemeal approaches have failed to make much headway, and so have strategies that have not incorporated the dynamics of the prevailing social, economic, governance and environmental conditions. There are of course a number of key constraints to be addressed in constructing such a pathway. These I wish to discuss, suggesting ways of overcoming them, in a future column.

Edge and Bluntness

by Alif Zabr

Democracy is said to be a pronounced leveller, but the huge valley of common denominator has many peaks of affluence and artificial props which rankle many pedestrian minds, disturbed by sharp edges which should not be there.

THE human body, thus declared a TV commercial of a big multinational company. 'Round off the edges', what does this introduction mean? He is a bit edgy today indicates a definite mood of the day.

A cultivated mind has no edges -- the projection of the personality is balanced. It is not the same as professional competence; a person (ality) is more than the sum of the parts. It is the overall effect which establishes the first impression about a person, a place of art, a scenery, a snatch of wailing music, or the advent of the dawn with the singing of the birds.

Look around a tennis ball. Why it looks the same from any position or angle, from any dimension (3-D, length, breadth and thickness, or three planes 90 degrees away from one another)? That is a metaphysical question, which calls into play the question of grasping the philosophical background. It is an interesting mental exercise.

Consider the property of a sphere, and a triangular personality. The latter three edges, prominent traits or sharp qualities (good or bad, weak or strong), easily detectable at the first opportunity. What is a balanced personality? It is a lifetime question for self-analysis.

Let us turn to politics, the most heated topic in Dhaka. Sharp politics has edges, as a project or undertaking in the first raw stage. What is good politics without edges (constant provocation)? One is reminded of Mandela. He came quietly after two decades in political prison; became the head of the nation; made his adversaries his allies, and left the stage quietly -- his job done. Smooth. Retiring from a scene needs a lifetime of practice.

How to retire quietly and pleasantly (especially in politics) at the right time is an uncommon trait, and rarely seen. Jyoti Basu wished to retire, but was persuaded to continue, after two decades, even at the ripe age of 86. Lee Kwan of Singapore, quietly brought up his nation to

international level (quiet efficiency, visible at a distance, but not at the site). How these top personalities handled their charisma is worth studying by the scholars and researchers.

Here is a significant quote from Jyoti Basu, the veteran political leader, on the resignation issue of three cabinet ministers in New Delhi against certain allegations. "If this be their morality, what can be done?" Time is not only a healer, but also a beacon. Impatient leadership has its pitfalls, because the decision-making might involve millions adversely.

This brings into focus another side of the 'edge' and sharpness question. 'His conscience is blunted', means the moral sensitiveness has been blunted and is not sharp enough (as a knife is sharpened from time to time to remove the bluntness) to the litmus-tests of daily life. It is common to come across persons with eroded moral and religious sensitiveness. Pride and prejudices are minor examples of sharp edges; as also various complexes (inferiority, superiority, and others).

A polarized action has edge-ness or some particular direction or trend; for example a review of a national situation may be political, social, economic, or religious. The greatest good for the greatest number is an oft-quoted aphorism before the implementation of a national policy.

Erosion of moral, aesthetic, cultural, social, and religious values is one impact of the current information age, when more information is available at more points more easily and cheaply, overloading the input with considerable garbage, and thus disturbing or distracting from the one true sense of direction.

Democracy is said to be a pronounced leveller, but the huge valley of common denominator has many peaks of affluence and artificial props which rankle many pedestrian minds, disturbed by sharp edges which should not be there.

TOM & JERRY

