

Feature

Healthcare in Bangladesh

The Missing Link: A Social Ecology

By Gordon Peters

We really need a new paradigm for health which does indeed take on board the essentials of primary health care (PHC), which can incorporate the changing knowledge base and action orientation to maintain public or environmental health, and which can focus on the shifting of power over the use of resources to 'the grass roots.'

THERE has been much discussion recently in informed circles of government, professionals and donors concerned with healthcare in Bangladesh, about reaching the poor, being more sensitive to women's issues and even listening to local voices. This should indeed be all for the good and shows a welcome waking up to the problems of dependency culture, lack of fit between administered services and the needs of people, especially the poorest, and the often perverse results for real health of the predominance of medical power and 'I know best' interventions (whether West-based or East-based).

A further push towards a humbling of the experts, and realising good practice for community health through examples of both intensive and extensive involvement of ordinary people in determining their health care outcomes, from many different parts of the world, may well have come from the 1200 or more who attended the Peoples Health Assembly at Savar, outside Dhaka, this week. And some excellent examples and calls to action there were.

The well meant aims of the world donor community of Health for All, 2000, which came out of the 1978 WHO conference at Almaaty and its intention of embedding primary healthcare (nearest to the consumer) universally, founded on the rocks of profit, but medicine, big drugs and little will power. Some of the fundamentals of primary health care (PHC) are now being picked up again -- close to people, prevention before cure where possible, taking into account the real social environment in treating patients. Many fine practitioners have never given up on these essentials.

But at the same time added into the complex enough interactions of systems and people that is there to be

understood in PHC, environmental deterioration and social injustices have become much more insistent in health care (and the lack of it). These are now of both chronic and crisis proportions, nowhere more so than in Bangladesh, where landlessness quickly becomes a health care problem, urban pollution and waste stagnation is about as bad as it gets, and recent studies show that the poor actually pay more per head than the rich for the medical services they get, and these often of poor quality and inappropriate.

The connections between being impoverished (the poor are not a static entity), becoming unwell and having to live in a physical and social environment which militates against health -- and being a woman, child, an elderly or disabled person in this milieu -- ought to be recognisable even to the average Gulshan resident. However most people live in villages -- with varying degrees of health hazard (e.g. arsenic). Yet there are examples here of whole villages where people have combined -- perhaps triggered by a disastrous event such as flood -- to recreate a social environment, and a physical one, to sustain acceptable livelihood and income, community health facilities and sanitation, and a strong sense of their own wellbeing. Such a place is Pans Kitta in Comilla district, where 80 per cent of village households are part of a thriving Comprehensive Village Development Society. Or the very poor island of Hatiya, partly eroding into the Bay of Bengal where a local NGO over the last 10 years, called Dwip Unnayan Sangstha (DUS) has worked to create mothers' groups, health action days, grow nourishing plants and teach gardening side by side with health care delivery at static and satellite clinics, and all in good relation with the upazila Health and Family Planning Office, with whom

they share the immunisation burden.

What is missing then, from the discourse on health care, is a more explicit and integral way of connecting the elements which in any community will combine to make health. We really need a new paradigm for health which does indeed take on board the essentials of primary health care (PHC), which can incorporate the changing knowledge base and action orientation to maintain public or environmental health, and which can focus on the shifting of power over the use of resources to 'the grass roots', to the people who live in defined communities, to decision making which does not exclude anyone, at the most local level. Professionals and administrators should value and include the local knowledge base -- particularly women's -- accumulated through time and practice. It is not just for civil society, the NGOs, and professionals to consider, and act; it is at least as much for government to see that its policy and resources are vital to such process, to empower local government and to learn from and trust community ownership of health.

That paradigm I call social ecology. It is striving for social justice and environmental justice as indivisibly linked, and making up the 'democratic deficit' for people who are used to being on the receiving end, so that they can say 'no' if they want to when the big powers come after them. That way lies health.

The most basic definition of this paradigm is to look after the Earth, to look after each other, and in doing so to look after oneself.

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Presenting, the Genetically Modified Athlete!

Track and field athletes at the recently concluded Sydney Olympics were slower than they have been for a long time but that's not necessarily bad news. It's merely an indication that dope tests are working. However, other dangers lurk, such as genetically engineered athletes with made-to-order muscles, writes Gavin Evans from London

THEY say no one remembers who came fourth. Well, no one except the British that is -- for the eloquence of one athlete who came fourth, marathon man Jon Brown.

Six months ago his marathon time of 2:11:17 minutes on a flat course at Sydney would not have brought the runner within seven seconds of a bronze medal. It would have been a whole minute short of gold. Surprising it may have been but Brown, not previously a top-20 marathon man, left no doubt about the cause -- the absence of drugs.

"It was probably the first marathon I've done on a level playing field," he said. "Now with the new test I feel I can be more competitive."

The new test he was referring to was for erythropoietin (EPO), a drug used by endurance athletes because it boosts the oxygen content of the blood. It is widely believed to be behind the sub-2:07min timing routinely scored in the world's leading marathons. The world received a hint of the scale of EPO abuse in the 1998 Tour de France when French police and customs officers came close to obliterating the reputation of the professional cycling event.

It was also taken as an article of faith in running circles that some of the world's leading marathon runners -- with Spanish and Portuguese men most commonly cited -- were EPO cheats. The evidence from Sydney suggests that new urine and blood tests, even though unable to test for long-term abuse, were sufficient to scare off the Europeans.

It was hard not to notice that several favourites were running at least 10 minutes slower than their best.

And let's not forget the Chinese. Desperate to shore up their credentials for the 2008 Olympics, they effectively traded running and swimming golds for brownie points by leaving home 27 hopefuls who field internal EPO blood tests. This meant there would be no repeat of the superhuman times secured earlier in the decade by Chinese distance runners.

Instead, it was back to business as usual.

So, Ethiopia's Derartu Tulu sprinted the last 600 meters to secure victory in the 10,000m just as she did in 1992. She was aided in her task by Britain's Paula Radcliffe, who led from the front, allowing Tulu to break the Olympic record. Radcliffe herself finished fourth.

In the past Radcliffe, who runs with a red ribbon as part of her campaign for more effective blood testing, has said she suspected that several of the athletes who routinely broke records were cheating.

This time she seemed more trusting. "We now have blood tests and we're doing better. Improving the tests is very important to me," she said, but added for good measure: "The blood tests are not effective

enough."

Ethiopian and Kenyan stars have seldom been suspected of EPO-abuse, which is why under cleaner conditions their medal hold has become even tighter than before. The clearest indication of this new hope came in the women's 5,000m track race, won by Ethiopia's Million Wolde in the astonishingly slow time of 13:35.49min -- the slowest Olympic winning time since the 1968 Olympics.

Yet there is ample ground for cynicism about the present and fear about the future. International athletics can cope with sluggish times in distance running, events the Americans tend to ignore.

Rather trickier would be a return to, say, 10-second plus winning times for the 100-metre sprint.

Alternatively it could not cope with the equivalent of Tour de France crackdown on elite track stars.

Several drug-testing experts say, off the record, that they suspect this was the real reason why the International Olympic Committee backed off at the last minute from introducing blood-testing for the modern elixir of power-based performance -- synthetic human growth hormone (HGH).

The IOC's climb-down occurred despite their sponsorship of a British-led medical

team that was on the verge of perfecting a viable test for Sydney.

Some Olympic athletes continue to use anabolic steroids (usually flushed out with diuretics -- a form of laxative that are also banned). At least 13 athletes were busted for these drugs in Sydney. There have also been widespread allegations of cover-ups of positive steroid tests, particularly by USA Track and Field, the national governing body for American athletics. That is why Carl Lewis -- probably one of the few elite sprinters from his era who ran clean -- decided to boycott the athletics part of the Games.

The steroid busts for the likes of American shot-putter C J Hunter -- the husband of sprinter Marion Jones -- and a bunch of East European disguise the more routine abuse of HGH and its companion, insulin growth factor (IGF1). Without the introduction of blood tests for these drugs, the only way of catching a cheat is the red-handed route, as happened to Sergei Voynov, the Uzbekistani coach, who tried to sneak 15 phials of HGH into Sydney.

Anyone more sensible can cheat with impunity.

It therefore came as no great surprise to find sprint times keeping pace with those of past Olympics and world championships. The exception was the men's 200 metres where the absence of star sprinters Michael Johnson and Maurice Green assured a slow time.

So to the future. The International Olympic Committee's straight talking medical director Dr Patrick Schamasch, asked whether HGH tests would be in place for Athens, was admirably frank in his reply: "I hope so, but my fear is that it will take much longer," he told *Gemini News Service*.

He went on to add that within a few years there may be new headaches -- "Like gene therapy" -- keeping the cheats ahead of the catchers. The idea is that genetic engineering can be put to use in a variety of ways to boost performance, producing higher output of natural hormones for instance, and perhaps even through building specific muscles.

And yet, for all this, Sydney has provided at least partial relief. The ancient don't-rock-the-establishment-boat regime of Juan Antonio Samaranch is drawing to a close. The International Amateur Athletics Federation has started to put the squeeze on USA Track and Field.

And there is now hope that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) will introduce electronic passports for athletes, which, among other benefits, will allow drugs testers to keep constant tabs on their movements.

The race is on for Athens. *Gemini News Service* The author is a writer and freelance journalist currently based in London. He contributes to the *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers and several sports magazines.



Chips down for EU fish

Decades of disastrous management have spelled a grim future for the stocks of fish in European and North Atlantic waters, scientists say. Although champions of the fishing industry contend that a few years' restraint will help over-exploited stock to bounce back, commercial fishing grounds can actually take decades to recover, writes Richard Ingham of AFP from Paris

FOR European fish stocks, the future is the net that's if climate change doesn't get to them first. Scientists say decades of disastrous mismanagement and environmental damage mean a grim future awaits the stocks of fish in European and North Atlantic waters, despite the cuts in European Union trawler quotas decided on December 15.

All-night haggling by fisheries ministers yielded some of the deepest-ever reductions in national catches, provoking sharp cries of pain from the European fishing industry. But the cuts were much less than those set by the European Commission -- and even farther from the goals demanded by conservationists.

Champions of the fishing industry contend that a few years' restraint will help over-exploited fish stocks to bounce back.

But the truth is that commercial fishing grounds can take decades to recover, according to Jeffrey Hutchings, a researcher at Dalhousie University at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

He assessed 38 species in 90 areas in the North Sea and Atlantic that had been devastated by factory trawlers and placed under tough quotas.

Of the 90 fish stocks, 41 per cent were still in decline 15 years after reaching a population trough, Hutchings found.

Another 51 per cent showed some signs of recovery, and the remaining eight per cent had fully recovered.

Worst-hit species were cod, haddock and flatfish, which "have experienced little, if any, recovery as much as 15 years after 45 to 99 per cent reductions in reproductive bio-mass," Hutchings said. The only exception was herring, which had recovered quickly.

He blamed poor management that failed to take into full account the age of sexual maturity among certain species and their rate of reproduction.

There was also "incidental harvesting," in which trawlermen unintentionally scoop up shoals of endangered fish while seeking a different species.

Experts from Britain's Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture in March called for a reduction of at least 60 per cent in cod catches in the North Sea. That compares with the EU's latest cut of up to 50 per cent, according to the fishing ground.

They cited four decades of persistent over-exploitation which had left fishermen today scooping up tomorrow's breeding stock -- small cod under three years old.

But they also highlighted a previously unidentified factor: the temperature of the North Atlantic, which since 1988 has been warmer during the spawning season than at any time during the previous three decades.

The phenomenon has especially hit cod stocks in the

southern edge of the spawning grounds, such as the North Sea, where reproduction in 1997 and 1998 was the poorest on record.

Another worry is about the consequences of man-made damage to the ozone layer, which shields the Earth from harmful ultra-violet light.

Scientists at the University of New Hampshire in Durham believe increased UV radiation resulting from the thinning of atmospheric ozone could be helping to kill cod larvae, the British magazine *New Scientist* reports this week.

Atlantic cod spawn in deep water, but the developing embryos float upwards to finish their development within 25 metres (80 feet) of the surface. At these depths they can be exposed to increased UV.

In lab experiments, the team found that 90 per cent of Atlantic cod larvae died within 10 days of being exposed to the level of UV light known to penetrate eight metres (27 feet) down in the Gulf of Maine.

When the larvae were shielded with Plexiglas, which screens out UV, only one in three of them died.

However, neither ozone damage nor global warming feature in political calculations about preserving fish stocks, a gap that scientists say could spell disaster for the long term.

The Pearl of Siberia

By Henry Meyer, AFP
Listvyanka, Russia

BURYAT ethnic Mongols settled the shores of Siberia's Lake Baikal long before the 13th-century conquests of Genghis Khan, and centuries ahead of the Russian fur traders who arrived in the 1640s.

Indigenous Siberians have always had a mystical feeling for the 'Pearl of Siberia,' a vast inland water mass which contains about a fifth of the world's freshwater reserves and is the world's deepest and oldest lake.

"If all petty worries, all the vanities of the world, fall away like autumn leaves, and the soul takes wing and is filled with light and silence," local poet Mark Segeyev writes.

"If a simple earthly wonder has entered your life and you have felt ennobled by this encounter -- it means, this is Baikal."

Sunlight casting its rays over the misty haze reflected in the snow covering the frozen Siberian landscape, the 25-million-year-old lake stretches away into immensity.

Located in between the Buryat Autonomous Region and Irkutsk region, Baikal is 636 kilometres (398 miles) long, has a surface area of 31,500 square kilometres and contains 23,000 cubic kilometres of water.

There are larger lakes than Baikal, in Africa and America, but none of the world's freshwater lakes are deeper than Baikal, which plunges to a depth of 1,637 metres. Lake Tanganyika in central Africa is at its deepest 1,435 metres.

From the surface to the depths, Baikal has given home to a multitude of forms of life. It contains 848 native species of animals unique to the lake (56 fish inhabit Baikal including the succulent Omul) and 133 species of likewise unique plants.

Unlike other deep lakes of the world in which the lower depths are dead, poisoned by hydrogen sulphide and other gases, here the entire depth is rich in oxygen.

The small transparent glass-like golomyanka fish, more than half of which consists of fat, plies calmly between the surface and the bottom.

The lake's huge water mass gives it certain features of a sea climate.

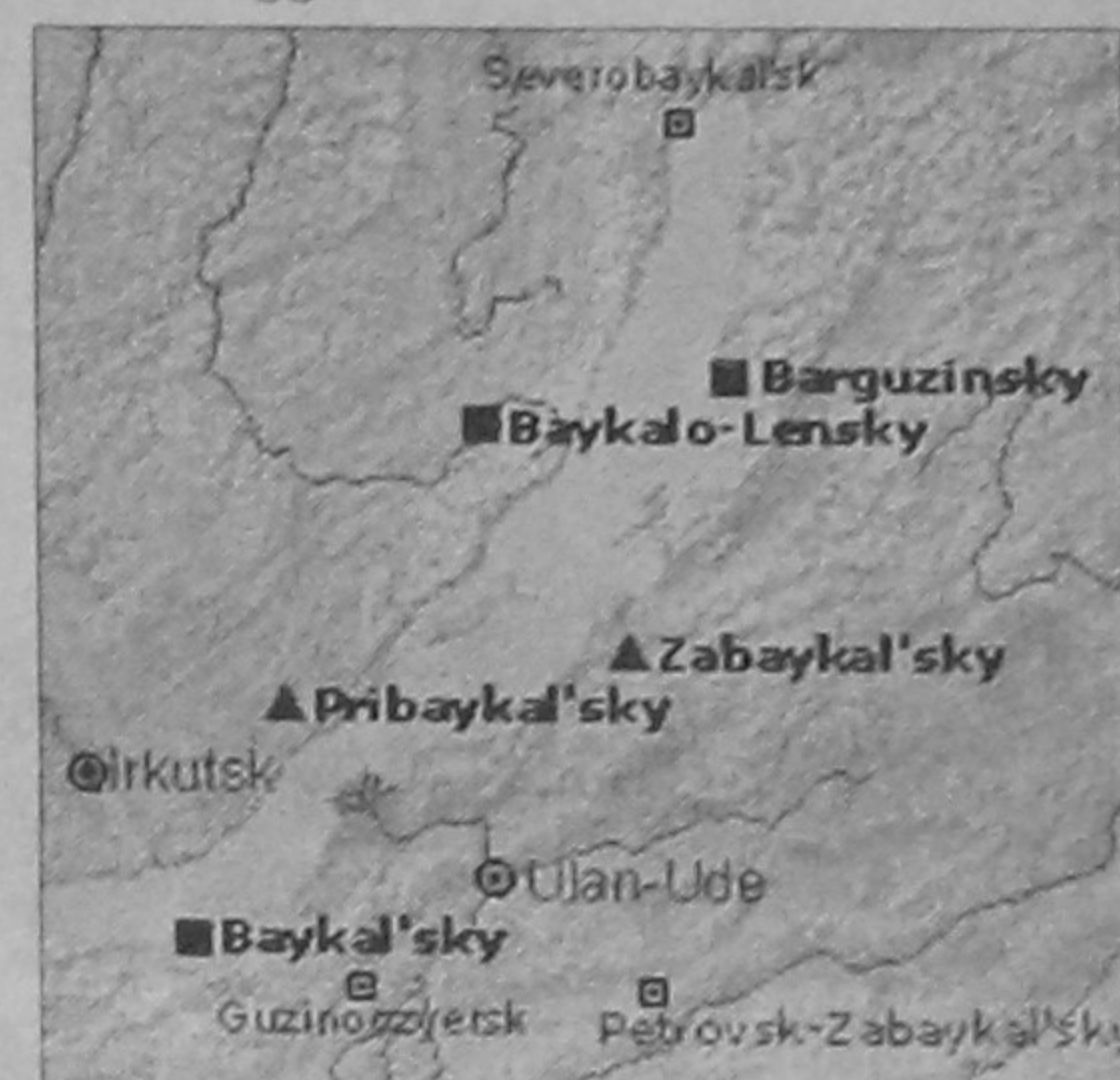
In autumn there can be 18 stormy days a month, and the strongest and most dangerous wind that blows is the Gornaya (mountain-bred), which reaches a hurricane's strength of 40 metres per

second or more. A peculiar feature of this wind is its suddenness: in 1902, during a spell of Gornaya, a ship Potapov, perished with its 200 passengers.

Baikal is still remarkably clean, but environmentalists famously lost a battle to stop the construction of a huge cellulose plant on the shores of the lake in the 1960s.

To this day dumping of industrial waste into the lake continues and bilious smoke still rises from the Pulp and Paper Plant at Baikal's southernmost point 24 hours a day.

In the second half of January, Baikal is fully covered with ice one-metre (three-foot) thick and more, and vehicles venture across the desolate wasteland -- occasionally plunging through the ice to a freezing grave.



During the Russo-Japanese war, when ice thickness was more than one half metres (the winter of 1904-5 was severe) the railway track was laid straight over the ice, which made it possible to carry 2,300 carriages and 65 locomotives -- by horse traction over 17 days.

In late April-early May the ice breaks. The 2,000-kilometre (1,250-mile) shoreline presents a landscape of striking and unique beauty.

Mountains, covered in thick forest, are the main features but in places mountain ranges fall away from Baikal, giving way to steppe.



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Is Celtic Tiger about to be slain?

By Sean McKiernan Junior

This week's announcement by the US Federal Reserve's Alan Greenspan that there was now a risk of a sharp downturn in the US economy, and even recession, is a grave cause for concern for the Irish government also. Even a small downturn in the US will have repercussions for Ireland's potential to attract the American investment that is the cornerstone of the Irish economic miracle.

THIS week the Central Bank of the Irish Republic has issued its most dire warning yet regarding the outlook for Ireland's expanding economy, nicknamed the 'Celtic Tiger' of Europe. It cautioned, "The economy is increasingly vulnerable to a sharp slowdown in growth."

Since the mid-1990s the Irish economy has registered strong and vibrant growth, averaging this year at 8.75 per cent. Employment has increased by 40 per cent since 1994, and there are now significant budget surpluses in contrast to the bankruptcy that faced public finances as little as 10 years ago. The air of caution comes following the recently unveiled budgetary policy of Ireland's centre right government headed by Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of the Fianna Fail Party. The Bank is obviously unhappy with the stimulus the economy has been given through more tax cuts in Budget 2001, spending increases, and the increase in wages which have resulted from massive industrial unrest across the key sectors of transport workers, teachers and nurses, all of whom are dissatisfied with the eroding effect of inflation on their already meagre pay.

There is a general consensus that the ideas suitable to a society with high unemployment and unused capacity, are being applied to a society where there is overheating, widening social inequality and polarisation of wealth, overcrowded infrastructure, and a deteriorating quality of life. In addition economists have already raised concerns at the extraordinarily high levels of personal debt incurred by Irish citizens amidst runaway housing prices and a rise in the cost of living.

Inflation is now a major factor in the Irish economy. It reached seven per cent for the month of November, but it is predicted that it will average at 5.5 per cent for the whole year. The government's proposed £4 billion package of extra spending and tax cuts announced at the start of this month have been widely proclaimed by Finance Minister Charlie McCreevy as a significant action in combating inflation. However, the Irish Central Bank warns that the budgetary measures will add one per cent to consumer prices, while the cuts in Value Added Tax and fuel duties will eliminate only 0.5 per cent.

However, if the new Euro currency rises, and rates for home loans fall next year -- as many believe they will, inflation should however be lower than the bank's forecasts. It is the accepted view of Minister McCreevy that it is the under-performance of the Euro; making the imports necessary for Ireland's growing consumerism more expensive, plus the global rise in oil prices, have more effect on inflation than budgetary policy. But the Irish Central Bank believes around half the inflation is generated within the domestic arena, particularly within the services

industry, which has been hit particularly hard by wage demands. The cost of wage increases generally must be paid on to the Irish consumer, since much of Ireland's rapid economic growth does not actually stem from an increase in productivity, but rather an increase in the working population in Ireland, from record unemployment in 1994 to nearly full employment today. The demand for labour was generated in the interim by a proliferation of American multi-national companies, availing of lucrative grants and tax breaks.

Inflation, house prices, credit problems and growth are all very vulnerable to the increasing demand created by the government's policies, the Bank warned in its winter bulletin. This month's budget has injected additional demand into an economy that is already running at full capacity, without taking any measures to increase that capacity. The Irish economy is currently suffering from severe labour shortages and inadequate infrastructure. It is estimated that traffic congestion will suck £1 billion from the economy this year.

This week's announcement by the US Federal Reserve's Alan Greenspan that there was now a risk of a sharp downturn in the US economy, and even recession, is a grave cause for concern for the Irish government also. Even a small downturn in the US will have repercussions for Ireland's potential to attract the American investment that is the cornerstone of the Irish economic miracle. In addition it will weaken demand and spending power in the US markets, affecting Irish trade also, since the US is close to overtaking the United Kingdom's position as the destination for most Irish exports. Many will be hoping those indications of Mr Greenspan and the US Federal Reserve's cutting US interest rates in the near future, in a bid to sustain a reasonable level of growth in the US, are implemented for Ireland's sake.

Another danger is a reversal in the fortunes of the Euro; a sudden recovery will result in obvious pressure for Ireland's exporters, whilst ironically easing inflationary fears. These concerns were echoed in the Irish Central Bank's analysis.

It would be foolish and unduly pessimistic to take the warnings of the Irish Central Bank as a portent for impending recession on that island. However it is a timely intervention for a nation justifiably proud of its new-found economic success, and as a result hostile to criticism, irrespective of whether or not it is constructive. Until now the general Irish population has been quite oblivious to the small, open nature of the economy, and its susceptibility to international trends, particularly the health of the US economy and the related Dollar to Euro exchange rate.

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