

Whither PRSP

M. M. AKASH

S many as 1.28 billion citizens of our planet are now living below the poverty line income. This is what the World Bank says in its World Development Report, 2000, Almost 72 percent of them live in Asia and about half of the one billion Asian poor live in South Asia alone! Bangladesh is a low-income poverty ridden country of this South Asian region. Every one man in two is considered to be poor in Bangladesh, if we accept the international definition of absolute poverty as offered by WB. According to WB if the income of any citizen in this world is below one PPP \$ he is to be considered as a poor man. Various scholars have heavily criticised this definition because of its over-simplicity and minimalist bias. However, in spite of the criticisms, it has been used quite widely for intercountry comparison of poverty, which obviously requires such a homogeneous standard of measurement.

What actually are the characteristics of these "Poor People"? Basically they are that part of the society who are relatively most deprived from income, wealth, education, social security and political power. They are the defeated victims of an unequal competition in an intrinsically unequal society. In Bangladesh there is going on a continuous process of unequal and unjust competition through which a greater section of the middle class is slowly becoming the member of a lower middle class and after a brief period of life and death struggle to hold on they also ultimately in most cases slide down to swell the ranks of the poor. Now a days in the literature you will find another category: "Poor Becoming Extreme Poor!"

Therefore there must be present an absolutely clear recognition of the following truths in any document promising to change the lots of the lowerdepth. Firstly it has to be recognised that if there is unequal distribution of initial endowments like wealth, education, security and political power in the society, then there cannot be any fair and equal competition. And the relatively deprived is generally bound to be defeated in that unfair economic and political game. Secondly one has to recognise frankly that the main challenge before a strategic planner planning to reduce poverty is to design such policies that will enable the poor and the weak to win in spite of the unequal nature of the game. So far we find mainly two types of strategic answers to this question.

The radical answer to the above question is to start with a revolutionary redistribution of wealth and power from which will follow an egalitarian growth or pro-poor growth within the society. The problem of that answer lies in its abstract nature. If one means business one should not stop here and proceed further in order to concretise and chart out a political road map for achieving that so called "Revolutionary Redistribution" which is of course not so easy!

On the other hand the traditional mainstream thinkers are prone to believe that the natural law of "Struggle for Existence and Survival of the Fittest" holds good in the society as well and therefore what one can mostly do is to device a few "Safety Net" measures for at least protecting the rights of the poor to live. The true meaning of these "Safety Net Measures", however, is to maintain the cheap labour reserve for the more powerful employers of labourers in the society. That is why they have set the minimum subsistence income or the so-called poverty line income as the norm for the millions of poor people of the globe. Professor Anisur Rahman, one of the founder members of the first planning commission of Independent Bangladesh had rightly ridiculed this concept of poverty as the "Livestock Concept of Poverty"!

&We have traversed a long way in the last century where we had observed the rise and fall of cold war between supposedly two diametrically opposite schools of thoughts in the field of development discourse. The practica experiences of the last century taught us two very definite lessons:

& Those who were in favour of radical "Affirmative Action" for the deprived

classes actually forgot that it does not mean either "Charity" or "Benevolence". It is actually a question of right of the deprived people justified not only by an external moral ethical ground but also by an active fulfillment of all necessary responsibilities by the enjoyer of those rights. The logic of affirmative action for the weak actually remains valid as long as it can be shown that this help is temporary and time bounded and the helped object will become an autonomous subject in due course of time. In fact in the early part of the last century we really saw the great socialist experiment being started with a radical redistribution of power and a move towards making the people the subject of their own development. But after a period of spectacular rise and success on the basis of a generous support from the above the people there slowly lost all their initiatives and had become a play-toy in the hands of the centralised state power. This is the real reason why people did not make any protest when the state elites in many of these socialist countries shed their masks to recapture openly the state owned wealth and thereby were able to turn themselves into "Mafia Capital" or "Corporate Capital". This was perhaps the biggest tragedy of the twentieth century but the lessons should be

well taken & On the other hand the so-called victorious capitalism had tried to introduce various reforms e.g. progressive taxation, social security schemes, etc. in order to address the issue of unequal distribution. But the experiences of twentieth century has also made it quite clear that such standard reforms

the poverty of Bangladesh. Now a days Donors no longer give grants or untied aids. Most of the loans coming from WB is either for a particular project or based on one or another certain strategic policy framework such as SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme). SAP has miserably failed not only in Bangladesh but also in many countries of Asia and Africa. The main policy thrusts of SAP are:

& Indiscriminate Privatisation of not only industries but also major utilities e.g. water, electricity, gas, railway, port, etc.

& The so-called policy of free market policy, which actually means almost unilateral withdrawal of all tariff and non-tariff restrictions by the aid-recipient country

& Withdrawal of all kinds of subsidies in the name of "Efficiency"

& Tightening the belt of the government in order to ensure so-called macro stability of the economy.

SAP was introduced in Bangladesh from the middle of eighties when the country was under a Martial Law Regime led by General Ershad. Later in 1990, five years after the introduction of SAP General Ershad was forced to resign from power facing a mass upsurge the backbone of which was the united movement of workers and employees, organised students and agricultural labourers. However SAP is being continued still now. At present it is at its last phase and is trying to privatise all the remaining industries in the state sector whether it is profitable or not. There is also a high pressure on

The truth has ultimately been revealed. So this time we are again going to have a donor driven strategy of poverty reduction and it is going to be approved neither through an extended participatory process in the bottom nor through a minimum national debate in the parliament in the presence of all concerned political parties. Thus we think it is high time to start our second phase of the campaign on the contents of draft strategy, which is after all the real substantial issue!

or safety net measures could not stop the absolute growth of the total number of poor people living especially in the historically resource poor regions. This traditional safety net approach is merely a tool for intervention only when somebody is sliding down into the pit of poverty. In that sense it is a curative treatment and not a preventive treatment of the disease of poverty. Thus if the spreading rate of the disease is equal or higher than the recovery rate then the number of poor patients will obviously not decline if not increase! Bangladesh is a very vivid example of this chronic poverty syndrome. During the whole decade of eighties the head count ratio of income poverty in Bangladesh remained almost static fluctuating in between 52.3 p.c. (1983-84) and 49.7 p.c. (1991-92). Presently some people are claiming that there was an impressive decline in the rate of poverty in Bangladesh during the decade of nineties. More precisely they say that in year 2000 it has come down to only 39.8 p.c. Leaving aside the statistical and methodological controversies even if we accept the last figure as it is then what does it actually mean? It actually implies that in 1983-84 there were 38.7 million poor people in the country but now the total number of poor has actually become almost 50 million! The complacent observers are actually presenting the picture of poverty of our country in relative terms, which again helps them to hide the increasingly alarming size of the poor population in our country. And it does not require a great knowledge in economics to understand that in a country where 50 to 60 million people i.e. almost half the population lives in an abject condition of poverty, everything is going to turn fragile and vulnerable

On Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) At present it seems that the Donors especially WB are very anxious about the government to dismantle BPC (Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation) in order to establish the complete control of MNCs on the gas and oil sector of Bangladesh. Similarly there is a high pressure from US embassy in Bangladesh to hand over the Chittagong Port to a foreign US based company. Meanwhile SAP was evaluated through a national participatory process of all the stakeholders including WB in Bangladesh and the conclusion was negative. The participants even raised the demand that WB should pay compensation for imposing harmful policies that have created a slump in the economy, increased poverty and unemployment as well as caused mass discontent in the Agricultural Sector by withdrawing subsidies. And finally it was recognized that nobody actually owned the SAP. The Minister also confessed that they were forced to accept the SAP under pressure otherwise loans or grants whatever little was coming would have been stopped.

[Debapriya Bhattacharya and Rashed Titumir (ed), Stakeholders' Perceptions Reforms and Consequences: Report on the First National Forum of SAPRI, Bangladesh, CPD and Proshika, Dhaka, 2001]

Given this unfavourable background not only in Bangladesh but also in all over the world the WB had to recognise the failures of SAP at least partly and they tried to put the blame on the local host country government who according to them were not sufficiently committed and have numerous governance problems. And side-by-side they also recognised the need for the safety measures to offset the so-called pains of the reform process. Last of all came the announcement of a "Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper". WB was now insisting that Bangladesh and many such highly indebted countries will have to prepare a PRSP within a prescribed limit of time (In the case of Bangladesh it is September 2002) and submit it to them for preliminary scrutiny and then they will in turn forward it to the September meeting of the member states of the board of directors of WB for the final approval. Till then all so-called soft loan options will be remaining withheld

At this juncture our organisation "Peoples Empowerment Trust" in cooperation with Action Aid Bangladesh launched a nationwide campaign ainst this process of donor driven PRSP [Please See our dialogue paper, "PRSP: What, Why and For Whom" in our web site]. The central theme of our campaign was "OWNERSHIP". We pointed out that like SAP, the Government is now again preparing a PRSP under the influence of the "Carrot and Stick" policy of WB and IMF. and this will produce a paper without any national ownership. We demanded to start the process of PRSP from the ground by first arranging dialogues with the people in the field to understand their understanding of poverty. We also proposed that the PRSP must be ntegrated with the existing long term and medium term national plans of the country. In that case PRSP will become a part of the whole and not the whole itself. Otherwise, we predicted that the sad story of SAP will be repeated again and we will have to repent afterwards saying, "PRSP failed because of lack of ownership and commitment"! We also apprehended that within PRSP there will be incorporated some of the unfinished macro agendas of the failed strategy of SAP and this is perhaps the real hidden agenda of WB behind PRSP

In response to our campaign Government of Bangladesh tried to meet both ends in a novel manner. They at first tried to prepare a PRSP in a hurried manner before the Paris Consortium meeting and to give it a semblance of bottom up participation they hired BRAC to arrange twenty-one dialogues. On that thin basis the consultants were asked to prepare a draft PRSP. It was finished just before the Paris meeting and our finance Minister took it with him to Paris calling it interim PRSP. But whatever negotiations took place in Paris it seems that the finance Minister was not at all happy with the donors' standpoint. Later after coming back to home he proclaimed in an open statement published in the top national dailies that although the donors ask us to sit at the driver's seat, but after sitting there we find that the steering wheel is really in the hands of the donors and my task is just to repair the tires and tubes after the accident. Subsequently we found that the name "PRSP" was dropped and the government circulated a draft paper named "Bangladesh: A National Strategy For Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction" for discussion.

We hailed these moves towards a correct direction and asked the Government to proceed further and incorporate the real demands of our people within it instead of those SAP agendas superimposed by the donors. At the same time we also started to think and plan about a critical engagement with the content of the draft "National Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction" [published by ERD, Ministry of Finance, GOB, in April 2002]. But to our utter surprise, we find that in the last budget session the finance minister retreated from his post Paris position saying that the WB and IMF actually have a stronger approval of his regime compared to the previous one. He also added that hopefully after finalizing what he this time called PRSP on the basis of dialogues held between the donors (meaning WB and IMF) and his Government, soft funds would be obtained to implement that so-called mutually approved PRSP". Thus the truth has ultimately been revealed. So this time we are again going to have a donor driven strategy of poverty reduction and it is going to be approved neither through an extended participatory process in the bottom nor through a minimum national debate in the parliament in the presence of all concerned political parties. Thus we think it is high time to start our second phase of the campaign on the contents of draft strategy, which is after all the real substantial issue! (To be concluded tomorrow)

M. M. Akash is Professor of Economics Department, University of Dhaka and Chairperson, People's **Empowerment Trust**

NGOs, division and development

DR. SYED KAMALUDDIN AHMED

HE recent development in the NGO community may appear a matter of big concern especially for the people who believe in equal participation of civil society along with government efforts to face the formidable challenge of poverty alleviation and social development. Media reports and "statements" and "counter statements" all point to the same manifestation that something went wrong in NGO community dividing a very powerful development force into two, may be more, encampments having different ideas or beliefs. It is not clear yet though whether it is a division based on principle and philosophy or merely functioning agenda or else anything to do with leadership conflict. There are claims that it is not a division at all rather an effort to coordinate and streamlining NGO activities in the country. Contradictory allegation tries to maintain that it is an unscrupulous manipulation to divide the NGO community and weaken their apex body ADAB. Obviously, myself being not an NGO personnel, I have no intention to elaborate upon this conflicting situation rather I would try to bring

contrariety, and may have roots in philosophical differences among them. However, it may be too early to form an impression and may be equally unwise to be too judgmental. Therefore, instead of wasting our effort on an unworthy yield let us revisit some common issues including leadership. Heifetz and Snider wrote about 25 years back in their famous essay titled 'Political leadership: Managing the public's problem solving', ".

that the idea of leadership itself shapes the process by which a society does its work". "Leadership mobilises groups to do work. Often it demands defining problems, generating solutions, and, perhaps foremost, locating responsibility for defining and solving problems", the authors continued. Therefore, it is not only defining problem and deciding solution, it is a bigger responsibility of assigning task for doing that. In present context of community empowerment thus the leadership needs to be viewed as the responsibility of turning the work of community back to the community. To accomplish the task in a community of social and economic heterogeneity it may need

other matters that may not appear pleasing but certainly a reality. There is a clear dichotomy in the NGO community between national and international NGOs. National NGOs often identify themselves as 'National' and 'Local' These unconventional dichotomies often give rise to tension. Over time, it has become evident that there is difference in philosophy and functional concept between the NGOs. It is often influenced by political understanding and motivation, and social and religious values in some other time. It oftentimes also creates skepticism, may be unreal, in peoples mind about possible hidden agenda of different nature in the guise of different development works.

Many of the bigger NGOs have easier access to international donors for financial assistance, and communication of these NGOs with donor agencies at times leads to certain degree of tension even with national governments. Donor aids are obviously not unlimited and may sometimes lead to unhealthy competition for scarce resources. Governments nowadays lean decision making power or opportunities to raise their voice. Smaller NGOs frequently resent these big brotherly attitudes of their bigger counterparts.

The government and NGO leadership together may like to consider initiating certain positive prodevelopment exercise to resolve these issues. They may consider developing an ongoing mechanism for maintaining positive working relationships, team building, conflict resolution and functional networking right from grassroots level. Prioritising the turf issues and planning for their amelioration by finding and cultivating common grounds may strengthen the networking effort. There should be initiative to develop a means to formally and clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of different organisations so that hostility and discontentment could be shunned off. Time should be taken to foster a sense of trust and credibility among the development partners through open and regular communication in equal terms, and to accelerate team building activities at different levels. There should be a positive motivation to consolidate the collective resources to maximise them and to decrease the potential duplication of activities. This would facilitate speaking in one voice and communicating a shared vision. If the NGOs fail to do that they may miss the opportunity of pursuing their hard earned accomplishment in generating grassroots movement, building people's leadership, ensuring people's participation in development, estabishing equal opportunity and gender neutral participation, innovating low cost service delivery, mobilising local resources to bring in sustainability to the programmes, to mention a few. It need not be overemphasised that NGOs can deliver services to the door step of the people at a very low unit cost due to their motivation, voluntarism and easy access to vulnerable and outreach population. In order to allow it to sustain the NGOs should reach a consensus to address the current situation with a result seeking motivation. The government with its legislative support to monitor NGO activities and in its own wisdom of taking an outlook of rather pragmatism instead of skepticism may worthily facilitates the process. One other issue may need some mention. Contemporary followers of the events feel that there may be some political power play that resulted into this undesirable situation. Some of the NGOs are often criticised for being instrumental in political accomplishment of one or the other political parties. There is no harm people being politically conscious and playing their deserving role and applying their political rights. NGOs have enough scope to contribute in good governance and reform of the political process at local as well as national level. However, NGOs may not like to mix up the national governnent and its agenda, and party in power and its programmes. In the question of partnership, one cannot wait till the party of one's liking comes to power. Partnership, especially in the field of development, is an ongoing and dynamic process. It cannot be stopped or postponed but may need some ime specific and demand driven adjustments. Sooner it is realised it is better for country's development. Otherwise, economic growth of the country will ever stagger and social regression will go unabated. The government would, at the same time, surely be wise enough to let these grave consequences not happen.

in a few issues that may provoke some thought among the NGO leadership under existing circumstances.

The offrepeated saving "development is the responsibility of the government" has become an antiquated myth and role of civil society particularly the NGOs in national development is an underliable truth now. This inestimable transformation has happened in conviction of principle of sharing commitment, skill and resources. Initiatives that emphasise sharing resources and developing partnership are based on the premise that no one system can successfully implement and carry through socio-economic development efforts alone. Cooperation, coordination and collaboration are different levels of networking, and as a coalition moves from one level to another, its members will find that each step along the way requires more time, more trust, and more commitment to the greater community vision. Taking the above facts in view, national governments, especially of developing countries, feel that as categorical initiatives due to limited resources available with them leads to fragmented programme development and service delivery, it is important to identify the functional realities and necessity to develop a process that would promote open communication and forming alliance among government and other development partners. This would in turn accelerate the building up of collaboration based on realistic motivation and appropriate skill. For, the most successful collaborative effort continually works to create further opportunities for cooperation and coordination, which begins with open and clear communication and consequent shared agenda. In view of the above understanding, government or nongovernment agencies, implementing specific programmes within a geographical or social community, creates provisions to communicate with one another in planning and implementing the activities and also in coordinating their service components.

If this is the reality then the recent happenings in the NGO community, as reported in the media, leaves enough reasons to be distressed. If someone carefully scans the media reports he may discover that the existing uncomfortable situation may be a consequence of, among others, leadership

It need not be overemphasised that NGOs can deliver services to the door step of the people at a very low unit cost due to their motivation, voluntarism and easy access to vulnerable and outreach population. In order to allow it to sustain the NGOs should reach a consensus to address the current situation with a result seeking motivation. The government with its legislative support to monitor NGO activities and in its own wisdom of taking an outlook of rather pragmatism instead of skepticism may worthily facilitates the process

consideration of shared or rotating leadership, and one may have to recognise both formal and informal leadership with a wider platform of participa tion. It would minimise the possibility of so-called coterie formation and disastrous infighting. NGO leadership, at this critical phase of their functioning, may not find a better alternative than to seek community opinion to decide upon further course of action to resolve the issues. At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that NGOs themselves form a community with diversity, among others, in their logical concept and purpose. Thus every NGO, irrespective of its size, strength and areas of functioning, should have a say and right in decision making.

This is all the more appropriate because NGOs, almost all of them, in their constitutional objectives, highlight the theme of community empowerment that is shifting the responsibility of developing ideas, planning and decision making from organisations, institutions and professionals to the community. Community certainly includes both formal and informal population groups taking into cognisance the social, economic, cultural and ethnic diversity of the population. Therefore, development initiatives of today requires a paradigm shift and the paradigm should be a way of looking at the principles that governs or significantly influences the manner we decide to behave. It is the community people who should decide upon these princi-

Once the issue of leadership is decided the leadership may look into few

more towards government-NGO collaboration after decade over experiences of positive yields from such collaborations. Lately, such collaboration has been carried to a step further, and NGOs have often to compete for developing such collaboration through open bids. Consequently, there is turl fights and competition for credit that may not always be bestowed with healthy common ground of functioning.

Leadership at the personal level, because of personal magnanimity and charisma, may at times symbolise the principle of development movements. However, there may be occasions where personality and attitudinal traits of the person would not appear conducive to the objective and purpose of the movements, and therefore may have a confounding effect on the whole issue of politico-socio-economic development.

It is often seen that NGOs with very limited organisational strength and resources aspire for working on diverse issues and fail to develop motivation and expertise in any particular field. These short-term interests, mostly out of availability of funds, may on many occasions, give rise to interorganisational antagonism and hostility

The Government, with a very good intention and for reasons of easier functioning, often assigns larger NGOs to share some of its responsibilities. Unfortunately, the larger NGOs often forget that any civil society initiative, whatever may be its nature, is not a routine bureaucratic exercise rather is a part of a development movement for the people who often do not have

Dr. Syed Kamaluddin Ahmed is a mental health professional.



7th Five Year Development Plan

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17 the Kingdom's developments; 7) To continue to achieve balanced arowth throughout all regions of the Kingdom and increase their contribution to national development;

(8) To enhance the private sector's participation in socioeconomic development;

(9) To prepare the national economy to adjust in a more flexible and efficient manner to economic changes and international devel-

opments; (10) To reduce dependence on the production and export of crude oil as the main source of national income, and to increase the value added to crude to oil prior to export-

(11) To diversify the sources of national income and to expand the production base of services, industries

try and agriculture; (12) To develop mineral resources and to encourage discovery and utilization thereof; (13) To complete infrastructure projects necessary to achieve over-

all development; (14) To keep abreast of develop-

ments in science, technology and information technology, and to encourage research, development and technology assimilation; (15) To continue to protect the

vironment against pollution and develop appropriate systems, and to preserve natural resources and conserve wildlife;

(16) to promote integration among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and to strengthen the Kingdom's relations with Arab, Islamic and friendly coun-

Saudi education system

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18 education for the handicapped.

The General Presidency for Girls Education administers the girl's schools and colleges, supervises kindergartens and nursery schools and sponsors literacy programmes for females. The first government school for girls was built in 1964. By the end of the 1990s girl's schools were established in every part of the Kingdom. Of the five million students enrolled in Saudi schools for the academic year 1999-2000, about half of them were females.

After elementary education, students can attend either high schools offering programmes both in arts and sciences, or vocational schools. There are currently over 4,000 intermediate schools and nearly 2000 high schools. Students' progress through high schools is determined by comprehensive examinations conducted

twice a year and supervised by the ministry of education. The Saudi education system achieved both qualitative development and quantitative development since introduction of the country's first development plan in 1970. The number of students increased six-fold between 1970s and 1990s while the number of full-time teachers grew more than nine-fold. The Kingdom's ratio of 15 students to every teacher is one of the lowest and most ideal in the world.

The Government of Saudi Arabia has taken a number of steps to improve the standard of education. This has been done by raising the quality of teachers training programme, improving standard for evaluation of students and increasing the use of educational technology, particularly introducing computer science at the secondary level. In fact, ambitious school

computer project, named after Crown Prince Abdullah, has eady been started in 2000 AD. Schools for Saudi Students

Abroad: As part of efforts to make education available to Saudi students residing abroad, the kingdom has established educational institutions for them throughout the world. The Kingdom has established three largest institutions in the United States. Britain and Germany. Students attend kindergarten through 12th grade at these schools, receiving instruction in Islam and the Arabic language, in addition to the regular curriculum. A new Saudi school has been established in Rome (Italy), bringing the number of such institutions to 18. The first meeting of the directors of Saudi schools and academies abroad was held in Taif in 2001 AD.

Higher Education: Saudi Arabia devoted special attention to improve higher education to cater to the needs of the country in various sectors of development. With this end in view, the ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975. The ministry embarked on a long-term master plan to enable

the Saudi education system to provide highly trained manpower to run the country's modern economy.

One of the first objectives of the long-term plan was to establish new institutes of higher education throughout the country and to expand the existing ones. By 1999, there were eight major universities and a large number of other institutions of higher education. As a result. Saudi students can now obtain degrees in almost any field within the country, and if necessary, pursue specialised education abroad.



A secondary school in Al-Ola in Saudi Arabia