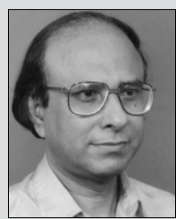


PRSP : Repackaging old medicine



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

ENJOINED by the Bretton Woods institutions -- the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) -- developing countries around the world have been working over the past few years to prepare their Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The edict was issued in 1999. In some countries the process has been completed, in others it is in progress. Notably, India refused to participate in it. Bangladesh is now preparing its PRSP.

PRSP and Washington Consensus-based neo-liberalism

Access to foreign assistance -- provided in the form of concessional loans from the Bretton Woods institutions and regional development banks as well as concessional loans and grants from bilateral sources -- is going to be conditional upon the preparation of the PRSPs by the foreign assistance seeking countries and the acceptance of those documents by the World Bank and the IMF. Indeed, a similar situation prevailed during the previous two decades, when the developing countries were persuaded/forced, under threat of no-assistance conditionality, to undertake stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes, within the framework of what came to be known as the Washington Consensus that called for such economic reforms as would establish a regime of free market neo-liberalism. The reform programmes ushered in an age of deregulation, privatisation, and globalization. The problems faced by the reforming developing countries around the world are now well-known. Although some of them, including Bangladesh, achieved significant results on the macro-economic stabilisation front, there has been a general failure in relation to significant acceleration of economic growth and alleviation of poverty. On the other hand, disparity has increased globally as well as within the reforming countries and, in many of them, the governments' ability to address pertinent issues -- such as poverty and disparity -- was seriously constrained, given that they had to roll back while the World Bank and the IMF assumed defining power in respect of the economic, even social policies they would formulate and that concerned national and international corporate

entities acquired increasing economic power and, hence, the ability to influence the policy directions they would adopt.

The world has become more divisive in the wake of free market reforms and globalisation instead of becoming more cohesive as argued by the protagonists of that paradigm. It was contended that globalisation would lead to economic integration, benefiting all the participating countries. But superimposed on the prevailing widespread and deep-seated global cultural and economic diversity, the reform process has in fact accentuated global disparity, marginalising further the developing world, particularly the least developed countries. Also, globalisation has been essentially one of trade and investment, both of which are mostly in the hands of the developed world, largely controlled and managed by multinational and transnational companies (MNCs and TNCs) originating in those countries. The movement of people from developing to developed countries for employment has become increasingly restricted. Following the Twin Towers tragedy of 11 September 2001, the situation has further worsened in this regard. Globalised labour movement is one area in which the developing countries would have greatly benefited as they have immense humanpower to export.

On the other hand, the myth of the triumph of corporate capitalism has exploded, as evinced by the mega scandals involving western corporate giants such as Enron, WorldCom, Vivendi and many others. Market 'fundamentalism' -- i.e. the notion that the market is the most efficient allocator of resources and promoter of growth and progress -- has been delivered a body blow. The corporate world is now suspected of economic 'terrorism'. Even President Bush, one of America's most pro-corporate presidents, has admitted that companies have been "cooking the books, shading the truth and breaking our laws." He has further said that the business pages of US papers "read like a scandal sheet"; and yet "more scandals are hiding in corporate America." (Pratul Bidwai, "Global Corporate Meltdown: Market, the fallen angel", The Daily Star, Dhaka, 30 July 2002).

Francis Fukuyama's declaration of "The End of History" following the collapse of Communism is clearly a figment of the imagination which totally disregards the underlying realities and processes at work (Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, Penguin Books, 1992). And yet, the Washington Consensus-based reforms forced the developing countries to embark upon a pathway built around the economic fundamentalism that free markets would solve their problems of poverty and underdevelopment. It may be noted here that it is not via unfettered free

market capitalism that the East and South East Asian countries achieved their uninterrupted, accelerated economic successes during the last quarter of the 20th century -- up to 1997. They did so by prudent state interventions on a wide scale while, at the same time, enabling the private sector to play an appropriate role within the framework put in place by the state. It was when the market was allowed to play a wider role without proper supervision, the well known 1997 East and South East Asian economic collapse occurred. A process of recovery was secured as the governments put the screws on the runaway market and regulatory systems were pressed into more effective action. Furthermore, the biggest peacetime economic collapse occurred in Argentina, where neo-liberalism ruled supreme, in December 2001, destroying the livelihoods of half the country's population and shattering the country's economic foundations.

But the PRSP is part of the ongoing free market reforms game. It seeks to renew aspects of those reforms; but the declared name of

MNCs and TNCs which are in the economic driving seats, both globally and in developing countries. The nation states have lost their authority to such organisations as the World Bank and IMF and also to international capitalism to a significant extent in the now globalised world. Not only that the Bank-Fund duo exert much influence, as is well known, on the policy making processes in their client countries but also the MNCs and TNCs often interfere with domestic policy making in the host countries.

Let me cite one example of how interfering MNCs and TNCs can and do become. UNOCAL and other companies engaged in gas exploration in Bangladesh have been publicly telling the Government of Bangladesh that it should export gas and that such a step is in the best interest of this country. This is clearly an interference in the country's policy making process. It is the government's business to decide what is in the best interest of Bangladesh and its people. According to contractual arrangements those companies can demand to be paid

mutually beneficial symbiosis between the power elites -- political, bureaucratic, economic, professional, military -- of developing countries and western corporate capitalism has been a major factor behind the developing societies generally experiencing increasing divisiveness. The PRSP process, conceived as part of the now ruling free market neo-liberal paradigm, cannot make a difference as it cannot promote a development process that is people-centred and sustainably poverty alleviating.

PRSP formulation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has over the years achieved some significant successes, which include significant reduction in population growth, infant mortality, maternal mortality, and illiteracy rates, and significant increases in agricultural production and women's education and participation. Also, however inadequate, democratic governance has been in place since 1991. But, about half the population (some 65 million) of the country is still absolutely poor on the

basis of cost-of-basic-needs, two-thirds of whom belonging to the extreme poor category (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Preliminary Report of Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2000*, Dhaka, 2001). Socio-economic disparity is glaring and has been increasing in the wake of free market reforms implemented over the past more than a decade. Poverty alleviation, therefore, necessarily remains Bangladesh's topmost priority.

As in many other developing countries, the Government of Bangladesh has embarked upon preparing its PRSP. A draft has been prepared, which has been made available for review by all interested groups, agencies, and individuals. One view being expressed is that the opportunity that the review process provides may be taken as a point of departure and all efforts should be made to get relevant ideas and proposals included in the document. The other view is that it is yet another attempt by the western free market neo-liberal establishment to renew and strengthen its hegemony, a view that is in line with the following statement emanating from a centre which routinely monitors World Bank and IMF activities: "The IMF appears to believe that participation will not challenge [the structural adjustment] programme content, i.e. it will not lead to radically different programmes being

formulated, it will simply give civil society a better understanding of why 'IMF-style' reforms are necessary and thus ownership of them. Generally, many donors believe it will be business as usual with a greater focus on social sectors and better safety nets to address the poverty element" (Angela Wood, "The ABC of the PRSP", Bretton Woods Project -- a project of the Tides Center that monitors the activities of the World Bank and IMF -- April 2000).

Indeed, the PRSP of Bangladesh when ready, as indeed of every other country that prepares it, will have to be approved by the World Bank and the IMF for it to become a valid document for those organisations. This clearly violates the sovereign authority of an elected government; as a plan it prepares has to be approved by external agencies. The people of Bangladesh have elected their government and it is to them the government is responsible -- not to the World Bank and the IMF or, indeed, to any other external agency.

On the other hand, loans and grants received in billions over the past three decades have not been of much avail for the country's people at large. In fact, an overwhelmingly large part of those billions has gone to foreign consultants, contractors, and for importation of luxury goods on the one hand, and misappropriation by people in authority and their collaborators in business and other walks of life on the other. In fact, it is the people's resilience and hard work that have in large part been responsible for the country's agricultural success story. There has been little public investment in agriculture since independence. Indeed, at independence, the population of the country was 73 million and we were food deficient. But, today, the population is well over 130 million and we are virtually self-sufficient in food.

But, the country's jute economy, which was its leading foreign exchange earner not so long ago, is now in the doldrums because of the failure of the successive governments to assist appropriately in the marketing abroad of the bio-degradable jute and jute goods and in effectively promoting alternative uses of jute. The closure of the Adamjee Jute Mills has dealt a further major blow to the country's jute economy. It has been done without taking adequate steps to find alternative ways of maintaining our share in the global jute goods exports or to enable the affected jute

growers to make necessary adjustments in their jute and household economies.

A perverse sense of elation has been expressed at the closure of the Adamjee by a number of international protagonists of the free market neo-liberalism. None of them has recognised that hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who worked in the Adamjee and in forward and backward linkage activities have lost their sources of income. Indeed, a company may have to be closed down in the process of economic transformation as circumstances may change very unfavourably. But the Adamjee was owned by the government and it was not just any company. Despite the fact that the Adamjee was making huge losses, it was irresponsible to close it down just like that. It was necessary to establish all the facts relating to its assets, workers, and others involved, and farmers to be affected, and also to ascertain as to how could the adverse effects be minimised. The ascertained facts should then have been put in the public domain; and since the Adamjee had for a long time been a major issue, all the relevant facts should also have been placed before the Parliament and discussed thoroughly before a decision was taken. If one asks the question: who benefits from free market neo-liberalism -- the answer surely is: the power elites benefit, while ordinary people suffer. In the case of the Adamjee, for example, while for hundreds of thousands of ordinary people the cost has been tremendous, the remaining assets might be appropriated by some 'mighty' people.

A suggested alternative

What then is the alternative to PRSP, indeed to free market neo-liberalism itself? A poverty reduction strategy must be conceived as a key driving element within the framework of a comprehensive overall national development strategy and that strategy must be formulated on the basis of the prevailing realities within the country and the external environment it faces -- aimed at promoting a participatory and cohesive society, as opposed to the ongoing divisive process. A framework should be developed on the basis of a regime of congruent macro, meso, and micro socio-economic and environmental policies and programmes, appropriately building into it the implications of regional and international opportunities and challenges faced. Policies and programmes should be so developed as to accelerate economic growth with due emphasis on its being equitably distributed and, at the same time, making it as environment friendly as possible. Human capability (in terms of education, training, health) development at all levels of society, and adoption and nation-wide diffusion of appropriate technologies should also be key elements. Equitable social, economic, and political

opportunities for all citizens and good governance (in terms of effectiveness, transparency, accountability, absence of corruption) need to be established to ensure that a participatory and cohesive socio-economic transformation takes place. Indeed, what I am talking about is essentially sustainable development, a concept about which a consensus has been emerging around the world. It is an integrated economic, social, and environmental development pathway, with human beings placed at the centre of the stage. As a global process, it seeks to address the glaring and increasing inter-national, intra-national, and inter-generational inequities, which are at the heart of unsustainability of the currently ruling neo-liberal paradigm.

This framework, as outlined above, provides the conceptual basis for formulating economic, social, and environmental policies and programmes and for developing governance, institutional, technological, and financial frameworks for proper implementation of those policies and programmes. The already substantial literature on how to go about constructing a sustainable development pathway is steadily growing.

Commitment to sustainable development was made by most of the world's governments in the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and the progress in its implementation at global, national, and local levels since then was reviewed recently (September-August 2002) in the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) with even a larger number of governments attending and committing to promote sustainable development. But the ruling paradigm remains market dynamics driven, which focuses on the individual, the company, and profits, and is often destructive of the environment through indiscriminate use of natural resources and emission of greenhouse gases. On the other hand, the sustainable development pathway calls for global, national, and local processes which promote equitably distributed vibrant economic growth, embodies poverty alleviation as a process component, incorporates processes designed to steadily reduce global, national, and local level disparities, and focuses on environmental protection and enhancement. Clearly, the ruling free market neo-liberal paradigm and sustainable development are in basic contradiction to each other. This is at the heart of the problem. Neither the PRSP nor any other idea or proposal derived from the now ruling paradigm can promote participatory, cohesive development and, hence, sustainable poverty alleviation at a fast enough rate. A paradigm shift to sustainable development is called for.

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Recalling 12 November 1970

The night the cyclone of the century devastated the delta

SHAHADAT HUSSAIN

IT was after 16 hours of continuous floating in the sweeping tide that his feet touched soft soil below -- a char land under water. The receding water stood at his chest-height and gradually went down to waist-height after about an hour. It was a new lease of life for him in his fight for survival against the onslaughts of turbulent current, bitter cold of November, hunger and thirst. He was almost out of his senses. Yet, he warmed up all his strength and energy in a bid to look for help and safety. He looked around to locate where he was but could not. Water and water all around and a continuous overpowering sound of the fast flowing tide and wind. Suddenly he found two green papayas passing quickly by him. He grabbed and ate those. After some time two coconuts also came in floating. He grabbed those too and kept with him. Then to his surprise, he located a young girl at a distance, plunged into her neck in the water. He shouted and waived at her to come near him. She cried out that she couldn't do that, because she had no clothes on her. He took off his shirt and threw it out to her while she approached near him. She put on the shirt under cover of the water. Then they looked at each other deeply. She felt the unbearable fatigue, but the distant drums of life poured in some music into her ears. Will she survive? Yes, she will she thought. She clung to him. They gained more courage together. It was then a wooden table passing by. They got hold of it, broke the two coconuts on it and had their dinner for the night out of those. The night set in and the water started swelling up again with the high tide. They rested their weight on the table and started their journey over again to an unknown destiny through the darkness of the night. They were picked up from the sea next day, the 15th of November, 1970 by a vessel M V Monirul Huq 10 miles off the coast of Sandweep island after 36 hours of their struggle for survival.

The man was Jahangir, 22, from South Mehtabpur of Noakhali, a student of the City College of Dhaka, who had been to Char Kalakopa during his holidays to supervise the harvesting for his joint

family. The girl was Siddiqua of Char Karamullah. She was in her teens. Both of them were swept away by the 20 feet high tidal wave on the night of the 12th November, 1970 from their two distant places and met miraculously in that char land. Jahangir survived the initial onslaught of the cyclone and tidal wave by catching hold of a small log and Siddiqua the tail of a cow.

The horrors in real life

The story narrated above is part of a tragic drama that unfolded on the fateful night of the 12th November 1970 in the Ganges Delta of then East Pakistan, a drama that shook the world with its horrors. It was the worst natural disaster of the century, a disaster that took toll of one million Bengalees of the coastal areas. The government reported burial count as only 195,387, missing 13,980, totaling 209,367, a very scanty figure far below real figure due to obvious reasons of practical difficulty. The exact figure could not be ascertained and will never be since the population of the innumerable numbers of island and char lands were never known even to the government's survey department. But it was the harvesting time. The char lands and the coastal areas of entire East Pakistan were teeming with countless numbers of labourers, land owners and crop traders who not only belonged to the places near-by but also came from various districts in the main land. It was at such a crucial time that the cyclone and the tidal wave hit these places.

The first few relief vessels arriving at the islands of Hatiya, Ramgati, Manpura, Bhola could not even find a single labourer nor a single countryboat to unload the relief cargo. There were no signs of life, even no birds, dogs, cows, goats, buffalos. Corpses and carcasses were floating everywhere. Thousands and thousands were lying on the coasts and embankments after the water receded. Unknown numbers of dead bodies floated out to the Bay of Bengal with the ebb tide. A floating pier made of the trunks of banana trees was found in the sea with nine dead bodies of small children. Perhaps, the parents of a joint family tried to save them that way as the last resort and then they themselves perished too. There were no traces of most of

the houses in the entire devastated areas. One a few solid houses and buildings were left with severe damages. The scenes at Galachipa, Amtali, Bhola Manpura, Ramgati and Hatiya were beyond description. Strangled dead cows and children were hanging from tree branches and bamboo bushes. A naked man and a woman, a cow and a huge snake were lying dead together at a place in Galachipa. A woman with a half-born baby was lying naked and dead in another place. Dead bodies of children clung to dead mothers were common scenes everywhere.

Children were scarcely found after the disaster. Some of them, who miraculously survived were found weeping and searching for

parents from place to place. A man from Sonadia of Hatiya island cried and cried for being left alone in the world. He had his entire family climbed on the roof-top of his house. When the house collapsed in the tide, his wife was swept away instantaneously. He got hold of his three minor children but gradually became unconscious in his fight against turbulent current, whipping wind, rain and bitter cold. He lost his grip. One by one the children vanished in the tide. He could hear their panicky sereams for moments: "Don't let us lose, Daddy". The toll of the lives of children was so big that the relief officials sent messages from the affected areas to the mainland advising not to send clothes for children.

S Jagatmitra, and India merchant vessel sank with 59 crews, and engineers 100 miles south of Khulna. She was on her way to Kuwait with pig iron from the port of Calcutta (Kolkata) and perhaps, that was the beginning of the disaster. A great number of Hindu pilgrims arrived at or on way to the Dubla Island off the coast of Khulna were

folded in by the thunderous rolling wave. A 14-member team of experts from the World Bank, US AID and two associated engineering firms were lucky enough to escape the disaster by taking shelter in a two-storied rest house of EPWAPPA, the only two storied building in the locality situated within high embankments. The entire population would have been wiped out but for the embankments some people survived. The average height of the embankments being 18 feet, the 20 feet high tidal wave came inside the embanked places in a less severe way except in places where the embankments broke down.

Some of the washed away men and women were blessed enough to have been picked up by foreign

wave came up from the sea with terrible thrust to the utter helplessness of the unfortunate millions. A second wave of equal fury came from the north at about 02-30 AM (02-30 hrs) while rolling back to the sea. The hurricane blasted the region till 05-30 AM, the rains accompanying all through.

The water took days together to recede completely. The first wave, it appears, took the normal route of regular high tide in the region. Perhaps, the full moon (if was the second day) and the sweeping wind played their tricky roles in pulling up the tide to 20 feet high -- at some places 30 feet high. The great Danger Signal of the Met. Office had scanty reference to tidal wave. Even had there been any, it would have

overcast the whole of country. Film artists, musicians, students and commoners poured out to the main roads at Dhaka, singing an elegy "Kando, deshaboshi" kando for collecting relief money. The festival of the Asian Highway Car Rally was cancelled by the Governor of East Pakistan. Pakistan's President General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan took a flight to Islamabad overflying the devastated areas on his way back from China via Dhaka. But, still no substantial relief goods reached the unfortunate survivors for nearly five days. A few small vessels of East Pakistan Shipping Corporation, Inland Water Transport Authority and some gunboats of the Pakistan Navy were engaged in

The depression and severe storm was first located 500 miles south west of Chittagong on the 11th November, 1970. In the afternoon next day the Patenga Met. Office issued Great Danger signal forecast for the entire coastal districts. The severe storm which later intensified into hurricane hit Khulna region around 6-30 PM and gradually took hold of Khulna, Patuakhali, Barisal, Noakhali and Chittagong viz the entire coastal region of East Pakistan, as if, in a planned way. It was about 12-O'clock at night that the roaring devil, the monstrous 20 feet high wave came up from the sea with terrible thrust to the utter helplessness of the unfortunate millions.

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World reaction and relief operation

So, when the water subsided, the utmost urgency was to rush relief goods from the mainland. There were no food, no fuel, no clothes, no medicine and of all, no drinking water. Neither the government nor the people of the mainland were aware of the catastrophe of such a magnitude. But when information of the actual scenes gradually trickled

carrying very meagre quantities of relief goods for millions and millions of survivors. Meanwhile, the survivors in the far-off islands and char lands got to taking off clothes from the dead bodies in their struggle for existence against bitter cold of November. By then the dead bodies started decomposing spreading unbearable stinking odour in the air. Cholera took some lives in Hatiya and other places. Burial of dead bodies and effective supply of relief goods were the imperative needs then, but the government was still suffering from lack of transportation, telecommunication, coordination, and of all, finance and relief goods.

Thanks to the international community, it seemed there was still a bit of humane feeling left in the world in spite of all the political, economic, religious and racial clashes and hatreds. Though late, yet they responded in an exemplary way. The first to rush to the devastated places were the news correspondents, photographers, television men and freelance journalists of various internationally famous

press organizations, daily newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines, television and broadcasting concerns. Then came in the governments. India, the arch enemy of Pakistan came in with a donation of one crore rupees, offered their civil and military aviation assistance and also gave flat permission to all foreign aircraft to overfly the Indian territory for carrying relief goods to East Pakistan. The United Kingdom, the United States of America and West Germany came in a big way with financial assistance and all-round relief materials, transport planes, helicopters, trucks, landrovers and assault boats. China released Yuan equivalent to 12 million US dollars, besides another 12 million in kind and cash by the Red Cross Society of China. Soviet Russia sent down huge transport planes, helicopters and sea freighter S.S. Mdnogorsk with relief consignments. American 747 Jumbo jet landed at Dhaka. Also came giant C141 transport planes, UH-1 Huey and Bel Helicopters with relief goods. Mr Richard Wood, British Minister for Overseas Development flew to Pakistan to discuss further relief measures with Pakistani High Command. HMS Intrepid, an 11 thousand ton assault ship and HMS Triumph, a heavy repair ship, arrived from United Kingdom's Singapore base with eight helicopters, assault crafts and a squadron of army engineers, besides previous arrivals. West Germany flew even hospitals and a water treatment plant by planes, in addition to other goods. Also came in Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Scandinavian countries, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kenya and many other countries of the world with relief in cash and kind. Donations from private organisations and individuals poured in too. The International Red Cross Societies spared no efforts in rendering the best. A heartfelt donation of US \$ 1000 was received from Lord Casey of Australia, a former Governor General of Bengal. As for the quantities of relief goods and distribution of those, the picture was a sorry one. The total relief was thoroughly inadequate for the teeming millions of the survivors and never reached the entire needy population. At places, relief carrying helicopters

were surrounded and even damaged by the hungry people in quest of more food. The people of the Ganges Delta of East Pakistan were 100 percent dependent on agricultural economy. Now, with the vast labour force gone, capital gone, ploughs and cows gone, a season's entire crops gone, the next season's prospect of crops gone (due to salinity), what could sustain them for long!

Political consequences

It was very strange that after such an unprecedented and worst natural catastrophe in East Pakistan that took toll of about one million innocent lives, not a single leader from West Pakistan visited the affected areas of East Pakistan. President of Pakistan General Yahya Khan, while returning from China, took his flight from Dhaka to Islamabad overflying the affected coastal belt areas and had a glimpse through binocular from very high altitude and that was all from the West Pakistan side.

Moulana Bhashani, the chief of National Awami Party (Bhashani) had boarded a vessel at Chittagong on the 18th of November 1970 to go to the affected areas, but it was held up near the mouth of the Bay of Bengal by higher authority to prevent him from going to the affected areas. But the Moulana was stubborn and made his way to the affected areas. Later he delivered a speech at a huge public meeting at Paltan Maidan on the 23rd November, 1970 narrating his harrowing experience. In this meeting he demanded the resignation of the Pakistan Government! He blasted the government for total negligence while millions of people were fighting for life in the affected areas. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the top leader of Awami League also visited the affected areas and later called a press conference at Dhaka on 26th November 1970 to speak out his mind. He also accused the Pakistan government of criminal negligence.

The monstrous tidal wave of 1970 thus gave a fillip to the already hurt feeling of the people of East Pakistan--the victims of discrimination.

Shahadat Hussain is a retired executive of a foreign global trading company and was born in Hatiya island.