

Aid? What aid?

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I write this paper at a time when there is so much talk about writing off the debt of the least developed countries and providing more aid to some of the African countries. I am certain that most readers of this article will agree with me that, while we are talking so much about reduction of poverty, the gap between the rich and poor is widening even further. I cannot think that many of us would oppose a reduction in the extremes of wealth and poverty that exist in the world today.

While poor countries provide exploitable source of cheap labour or desirable commodities, in the long run the corrosive effects of the imbalance create suffering, resentment, and a powerful motive for revenge. Moreover the imbalance creates migration which, however one regards it, is disruptive to social order at both ends of the route, while the primal survival instinct encourages a shadow economy in which those, denied access to the formal markets of the globe, are further exploited. Aid, the way it is given by the western world, is not the solution. This article will deal with the matter a little later.

Readers of this paper will appreciate that trade is the great moderator, facilitating development at a pace that is usually more or less

acceptable to all parties, provided that it is fair, which a great deal of it is not. Multinational companies threaten to pervert this ancient intercourse between people but, historically, trade smoothes differences and builds up commercial interdependence, understanding, and tolerance. There are always winners and losers, but it is by way of trade that we have come this far from the dark caves of our remote ancestors. Trade is better than aid, and fair trade must be allowed to flourish.

Aid is supposed to be a stimulant for both the donor country as well as the recipient country. For the donor country it is a source of investment where it will get back the capital in due time, in most cases with profit or interest. In some cases it provides the donor the opportunity to sell goods and services and thereby maintain the momentum of its industrial growth. However, in recent days it has more or less become a stimulant for the donor country alone. The matter will become clear when I discuss the mode of operation of three different types of aid.

Sadly, we know of our cost, that injections of cash aid, so easily siphoned off by the opportunist politicians and corrupt dictators, achieves little other than fueling small wars. It promises a bloody century where the western world

sells its weapons. In the past we supported many brutal regimes so long it served our global interest.

Apart from cash aid, aid in the form of total grant is given. This is certainly a good humanitarian gesture. There is no harm for the donor to insist that the aid be utilised for procurement of goods and services from the donor country. However, the donor country must ask for transparency. All

recipient country has to utilise the aid in a sector that will directly generate funds to repay the loan. Transport and communication within the public sector is vital for stimulating economic activities. State owned industries could also be considered for modernisation and growth but in no way sick industries should be given any state subsidy from such aid. This is all about the recipient

c) spares and servicing (tied up with the procurement of goods) for several years from the donor;

d) shipping on flagged/owned or managed vessel; and in some cases even

e) appointment of consultant from the donor country to oversee the project; and

f) training of personnel in centres in the donor country.

snatch it from their basket. We must give it to the countries with democratic values and good governance where the government will be accountable to their people through the parliament. The government of the donor country should also be accountable to relevant parliamentary committee in its own country.

According to Article 1 of its charter,

The case has been clearly laid out for the developing countries to take into consideration all relevant factors before they get into the "aid" trap. Do not get addicted to aid. Accept aid only for genuine needs and on your own terms. Make sure it is utilised the right way so that it can not only be paid back but make a difference. Try best to achieve trade balance, if not surplus.

procurement must be through open competition in the donor country. The recipient country may utilise such grant for betterment of public services and infrastructures. Education and health are perhaps the two best sectors for utilisation of grants. I tried to link up these two sectors with total grant because there is nothing to pay back. Health and education may not generate any fund but make valuable long term contribution to the economic growth of the country.

Now we shall deal with the repayable aid. This could be with interest or without interest. The

country.

Now I shall focus on the more important aspect. It is unfortunate to note that the donor country sometimes insists on procuring goods and services from their country. I feel it is wrong. If the recipient country has to repay the money then they should have the right to make the best deal available (globally) without any restriction. In some cases the conditions attached to such loan/aid includes:

a) feasibility study by consultant of the donor country;

b) procurement of goods and services from the donor;

What are we giving them? Maybe only 30 to 40 percent of the figure shown on papers and we want them to return 100 percent and that also in some cases with interest. Not only those, we sometime dump and flood their market with our surplus agricultural produce, destroying their own potentials. No wonder we are contributing to widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

If the western world talks of genuine aid then it should be given for genuine purpose with no string attached. Any evaluation, monitoring, and audit of the project must be done on the account of the donor. Do not

the International Monetary Fund has been created to: a) promote international monetary co-operation; b) facilitate the expansion and balanced growth of international trade; c) promote exchange stability; d) contribute to establishing a multi-lateral payment system; and e) place the general resources of the institution at the disposition of the member countries with balance of payment difficulties.

When the IMF intervenes in the economic process of a country in crisis or where one is developing, it does so by implementing a formula that it has applied to several

emerging economies. First, it advises to raise interest rates to avoid capital flight. Then public spending must be decreased so as to convert it into budget savings. And finally, but no less important, taxes must be raised in order to increase revenues.

Theoretically, and explained in this manner, these appear to be the best options for alleviating the economic problems of a nation; in practice, the story is quite different. High interest rates have catastrophic consequences for companies with debt, generating defaulting and bankruptcy. Reduction of public spending weakens the economy in general.

The case has been clearly laid out for the developing countries to take into consideration all relevant factors before they get into the "aid" trap. Do not get addicted to aid. Accept aid only for genuine needs and on your own terms. Make sure it is utilised the right way so that it can not only be paid back but make a difference. Try best to achieve trade balance, if not surplus. Do not depend much on invisible income. Attach more importance to production sector than the service sector. Balance the budget and try not to indulge in public borrowing (budget deficit).

With respect to direct foreign investment, it is necessary to have democracy, human rights, and stability. Investors will hesitate in climate of uncertainty. There should

be abundance of labour force with middle grade technical skill. Financial, industrial, environmental, and labour laws must be clear. Finally, bureaucracy and corruption must be under control. One simple theory should always be kept in mind -- more requirements of control, permit, and licence will automatically lead to more bureaucracy and corruption. This must be avoided.

The young generation in countries like Afghanistan, Cambodia, Somalia, Liberia, and Haiti have only seen violence. They have been deprived of education. A nation cannot prosper without education. The world community should come forward with lots of assistance in the field of education.

Countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Iraq, Nigeria, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Madagascar have no lack of resources. They need democracy and good governance. Let us help them develop appropriate institutions to manage their own affairs. For once, at least we should write off and wipe out all debts and give them a chance to start afresh. Give them their fair share of the trade and they will come up.

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Fixing the electoral roll

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DEMOCRATIC election systems require a good electoral roll, which has been prepared following certain criteria and mechanism for identifying eligible voters and preventing ineligible persons from voting. Such a mechanism helps in guaranteeing the "one person one vote" principle by preventing people from voting more than once during an election. It's the accurate electoral roll which is the fundamental document of setting up the criterion of a good election and on the basis of which the election officials identify fake or false voter on the election day. Thus fair and democratic election completely depends on the accuracy of the electoral roll.

Electoral roll is nothing but the compilation of various data about the eligible voters of a country, and although statistics allow certain 5 percent error, it is not at all acceptable in question of preparing the electoral roll because such an error may reverse the outcome of an election in some constituencies. Thus, the Election Commission should pay every effort in making the electoral roll cent percent accurate.

The right of all adult citizens to participate in the affairs of the government is one of the cornerstones of democracy. As the foundation stone of democracy, especially where it is a parliamentary form of government, integrity and accuracy of the voter roll are of paramount importance, which in ideally means the inclusion of all legally eligible persons on the electoral roll. An underage voter may creep into the electoral roll, but it is unpardonable to disenfranchise any eligible voter just by exclusion of his or her name from the electoral roll.

Perhaps the most fundamental form of participation is the right to vote in free and fair elections. The ability to exercise the democratic right to vote is premised on the existence of a comprehensive and inclusive voter roll, which is rigorously maintained to ensure, as much as possible, that each eligible citizen is

registered to vote.

Electoral roll is the fundamental component of any voting system. Enrollment procedure therefore need to strike the right balance between the need to be rigorous to ensure integrity of the rolls, and the need for flexibility to ensure that peoples' right to enroll and vote are protected.

One of the two underlying principles of effective voter registration is the system that facilitates the inclusion of all eligible voters in the electoral roll. Democratic governance requires the existence of free and fair elections conducted amongst a broadly enfranchised electorate. In order to realize this percept, then, all eligible electors should be included on the voter list and such inclusion affirms their right to vote in the election. The other principle of voter registration is the obvious corollary of the first, namely, that it should prevent the exclusion of eligible citizens from the list.

Controversies over the electoral roll were there for the last few elections in our country. The confrontational nature of politics also reflected in matters related to the electoral roll and has now become into a fashion for the political parties and candidates. Various reports reflected in different news media just after the publication of the preliminary electoral roll raised different controversies. Some of the complaints and measures taken by the Election Commission are mentioned below:

"The ruling party must not go head over heels to ridicule BNP's claim either; for it is much too serious for that. Ideally, we visualise a situation where the EC should play the pivot in engaging all the political parties and civil society members to weed out the discrepancies, if any, contained in the fresh voter-list." (*Row over Electoral Roll: Editorial The Daily Star, October 30, 2000*).

"Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) warned that election in hill districts would be prevented unless the voter list was cancelled and new list was prepared

before the October 1, 2001 election, arguing that the list was not prepared following the terms and conditions of the Peace Treaty and the District Council Law. The voter list prepared during May-June, 2000 included the non-resident persons staying in the Parbatya Chattagram, such as businessmen and army persons. PCJSS however claimed that the list should include only the permanent resident of the Parbatya Chattagram. (*Prothom Alo, November 10, 2000*).

"Women of 12 villages in Surat union of Jhenidah district had been barred by fatwa from casting their vote in any election in the last 85

Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Syed admitted the falsification of voters list reported by the press and complaints filed by different political parties and directed to the concerned officials to bring the culprits to book and take action as per rule.

Such controversies and complaints lodged by political parties and candidates clearly indicate lack of confidence in the accuracy of the electoral roll. Election Commission received complains from the two major contenders Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party and some independent candidates. Election Commission although made

national development process very successfully and in some issues more than the government institutions. The NGOs have been partitioned according to the political fronts (pro-AL NGOs and pro-BNP NGOs) on the eve of the October 1, 2001 general elections. In spite of that, NGOs have still been trying to deliver services in accordance to their goals, objectives, and jurisdiction. The political government should not consider the NGOs as a rival, but include them as a supplementary force in meeting the people's development aspirations. The NGOs can successfully help

who were thus left out, and enhance the public confidence over the electoral roll. Although the country-wide campaign led by FEMA was very effective, it ultimately could not reach its overall goal due to time constraints. Success demands long-term campaigns and large-scale meaningful involvement of the non-government and civil society organisations.

The whole nation has witnessed the formal politicisation of the NGOs of the country. In spite of these malpractices of the political parties, the Election Commission should seriously consider involvement of

regarding preparation of the voter list. These activities, including identification of probable problems in the process of registration, can substantially enhance the quality of the electoral roll.

Moreover, the importance of the pre-election environment monitoring including the process of nomination and its successful contribution towards holding a free and fair election suggests for monitoring of the process of preparing the electoral roll. Monitoring of the electoral process for ensuring a free, fair, and credible election is cannot be limited to monitoring of the election day only, and subsequently domestic election monitoring adopted some new dimensions. The controversies surrounding the preliminary electoral roll and its finalisations demand preparing and finalising the electoral roll under the long-term observation of EMOs like FEMA.

The manner in which the voter registration takes place, as well as the complementary responsibilities of the election administration officials and citizens vary considerably from one country to another. Registering into the voter roll in some instances is the responsibility of the citizens. Compilation of voter list for the purpose of elections to the parliament is based on the constitution, which vest responsibility for preparation of the electoral roll with the Election Commission. Under constitutional provision, there is to be one electoral roll for each constituency for the purpose of elections to parliament.

Another important issue to be addressed is ensuring the right to franchise of the expatriate Bangladeshis. Non-resident Bangladeshis, numbering 2.5 million, engaged in different jobs abroad are still considered ineligible to exercise their franchise in elections. The Election Commission however stopped the process of including the expatriates, mentioning that it was not realistic. Once the expatriates are included in the voter list, it will be a must for the Commission to take necessary arrangement for casting

their votes, which is not possible in the conventional system. Relevant laws need to be amended for ensuring the expatriates' right to franchise.

The Election Commission however can seriously consider the following issues with a view to rectifying the electoral roll:

·Engaging EMOs to monitor/check the electoral roll throughout the country, particularly in areas where there were serious allegations.

·Verifying the accuracy of the information on the voters' lists by conducting sample survey following a statistically accepted method.

·Identifying extreme changes in the number of registrants in a region, the current electoral roll can be compared with that of the previous elections.

·Determining duplicate registrations and the registration of ineligible voters, various computer applications can be used for the existing election database.

The Election Commission should consider formation of a vigilance team comprising volunteers from various EMOs and representatives of various political parties. These teams will be engaged in scrutinising the electoral roll of the respective areas under direct supervision of the election officials. If considered, the Commission should go for immediate implementation of such a programme for timely and effective completion of their activities resulting an accurate electoral roll acceptable to all.

Generally, the EC ought to have its own permanent personnel who would specialise in election-related jobs and remain to serve the EC while top executives (secretary, additional secretary, etc) may be brought in from the civil bureaucracy. The EC should also hire consultants from amongst former/retired officers of the EC who have previous experience of handling election related issues and problems. Experience has no substitute.

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years before the October 1, 2001 election. This was reported by a section of the print media on January 5, 2001, which described how about four thousand women voters of 12 villages in Surat union of Jhenidah district have been 'deprived of their fundamental right to vote in any election for about 85 years due to fatwa by a section of people.' Election Commission however directed the Deputy Election Commissioner, Khulna, and the Deputy Commissioner of Jhenidah to inquire into the complaint and submit a comprehensive report urgently." (*FEMA e-newsletter January 17, 2001*).

"Election Commission had constituted high-powered investigation committees to probe into allegations of falsification and fraud in the voters' roll at two places in Dhaka and one in Bhola. A four-member committee headed by a Deputy Secretary visited the constituencies where the voter rise marked by 50 per cent while country's average rise was 34 per cent." (*FEMA e-newsletter, June 28, 2001*).

a sincere effort to make the electoral roll free from complaints just before the last general election, but at last failed as the drive was not timely. Thus Election Commission should concentrate on the preparation for holding the election well ahead especially on matters which really take time. The political parties should play a complementary role with the Election Commission for holding the election in a free, fair, and impartial manner, and make the outcome of the election credible and acceptable to all.

The civil society organisations along with the NGOs should come forward with more boldness to establish an independent Election Commission free of political interference. Initiative of the civil society and NGOs helps bridge the gap between the political parties and the Commission, which can be strengthened through collaboration between the two agencies.

Emerging in the early 80s, the NGOs in Bangladesh have been enthusiastically contributing to the

government institutions in solving most of the national crisis. In this regard, Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) like some other civil society initiatives, has already set up some examples. FEMA has been vigorously advocating for electoral reform since its inception and contributing in the process of holding a free and fair election in the country. FEMA's contribution in increasing the public confidence over the electoral process is unprecedented. After consultation with a wide range of professionals, activists and political leaders FEMA brought some recommendations for changes in the existing electoral roll, some of which were included in the ordinance on the eve of the general election 2001.

Just after the official publication of the electoral roll before the election, FEMA had launched an awareness campaign *Let's Get the Voter List Right* with a view to promote a process for rectification of the electoral roll. The campaign also helped wipe out fictitious voters from the list, ensure enlistment of those

Election Monitoring Organisations (EMOs) like FEMA in updating and correcting the electoral roll by engaging its countrywide network of volunteers. Definitely involvement of a non-partisan election-monitoring organisation in the process of preparing and updating the electoral roll would help increasing its level of acceptance to the political parties and the general voters. Besides public consultation is one exercise that can be undertaken by the Commission about the ways and means of preparing an accurate and acceptable voter list, where the Election Monitoring Organisations can contribute a lot.

During the registration period a good number of people get an excellent opportunity to involve in the electoral process as volunteers with specific responsibilities. These responsibilities may include initiating voter education campaign, encouraging the people to register as voter, monitoring the conduct of the government officials, and implementing a system to process complaints

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