

Battle ground is rural economy

MANZOOR AHMED

In spite of progress in harnessing technology for food production in Bangladesh, ten million people, not assured of three square meals a day, suffer silent hunger. A million hectares of farmland is lost to non-farm use every year, and food security of at least 1.5 million additional people comes under threat.

Rene Dumont, the French agronomist, warned in 1973 about the danger to self-reliant development of "Sonar Bangla" if scarce farming land is not conserved. Development policy and action are yet to face up to this challenge in fighting poverty. Two eminent scholars suggest how after watching the change in the lives of rural people over the last two decades.

Prof. Abdul Bayes of Jahangirnagar University and Dr. Mahabub Hossain, Executive Director, Brac, and formerly of the International Rice Research Institute in Manila, have followed the evolution of rural economy and how it has influenced the lives of rural families.

They tracked a sample of households in 62 villages in as many upazilas since 1988. They went back to the same households to take snapshots in 2000 and 2004. They report their findings in a just released seminar

book (GramerManush Gramer Orthoniti, published by Writers' Foundation Bangladesh and Swaraj Prokashony, 2007) An English edition is in the offing.

The good news is the study's confirmation that the average size of the households has come down in two decades, from close to six to close to five. The proportion of infants and children under ten has also come down from over one-third to a quarter of the total household membership.

Child (11-15 years) labour has come down by half, from 22.7 per cent of the rural workers to 11.8 per cent. Non-farm employment in rural work force has increased from 30 to 48 per cent -- a necessary condition for raising productivity and earning in the rural economy.

In respect of education, population in the designated age-group (6-10 years) for primary schooling has decreased from 20 per cent to 14 per cent in two decades. Primary school enrolment has gone up from 60 per cent to 93 and 94 per cent, respectively, for boys and girls.

All households have been beneficiaries of positive change. Unfortunately, however, the relative gap between the poor and the better-off households has widened. For instance, in the case of virtually landless households (owning no more than the home-

stead), average years of schooling increased from 1.74 to 3.19.

For middle and large farmers, the increase was from 5.59 to 7.73 years. "Educational disparity is probably one of the main causes of income disparity in rural society," concluded the researchers.

Ownership of physical capital of landless households increased from \$161 to \$246, but the ratio of disparity with middle and large farmers remained 1:4 over two decades. The writers cite research that suggests that about a quarter of the rural households are safely well-off, and 30 per cent are in chronic poverty.

The remaining 45 per cent are precariously perched on the poverty line and may fall below or go above the line any time through vagaries of nature, falling victim to a serious health problem, or when a business decision goes sour.

The researchers investigated peoples' perception of their poverty status and the way out of it. It is interesting that the thought processes of the rural people and scholarly analysis largely coincide in identification of problems and their solutions.

Popular wisdom supports the view that low per capita income is the driving force behind income poverty and broader human poverty (access to education and health care, ownership of produc-

tive assets and control over one's life choices). Land ownership (beyond the homestead) and effective participation in education are seen as the key to altering one's prospects.

The writers conclude that a radical land redistribution policy is not realistic, but increased labour productivity and capital accumulation are attainable goals. The policy package for the poor must include effective education and skill training, improved health care, and access to credit.

They estimate that 40 per cent of increased income for landless households can be attributed to labour, and 25 per cent to capital accumulation derived from NGOs and other credit sources.

The basic policy thrust is eminently sensible, which policy makers must heed. The writers return to the critical question of conserving and using optimally the scarce land resources, which must be viewed broadly as a strategy for integrated regional planning and development.

Regional planning must incorporate growth centres, improved road network (with proper maintenance), rural electricity, distribution of health and education facilities, and cultural and recreational opportunities. The push and pull factors driving rural people to a few increasingly

unliveable urban mega-centres must be reversed.

New forms of effective partnerships must be promoted, embracing NGOs, local government with some clout, community organisations, and central government agencies. The aim will be to increase access to credit, technology, self-employment support, life-long and non-formal learning, and greater opportunities for women and girls.

The writers underscore the role of education and offer several suggestions. These would bear further scrutiny with regard to how education programs actually function and contribute to poverty reduction, before they are turned into specific action points.

Initial enrolment to primary education has indeed become near universal, but its extremely low quality (very high dropout and very low learning outcome) means that children of the poor are virtually denied primary education. The same applies to secondary education, only with greater intensity.

International experience and the lessons of several decades show that secondary school is a very inefficient instrument for equipping young people with employability skills.

Secondary education is now seen as part of basic education that must offer general commun-



PHOTO: ICRAF/ANNEKE DEKKE NEWS

cation skills, basic math and science, and computer literacy, for the 15+ group.

The implication for combating poverty is that opportunities for improving literacy skills and other relevant knowledge for better life and livelihood must be widely available through a network of community learning centres (run through NGO collaboration).

The broad vision, the web of interconnected strategies, and the required time perspective for rural, and indeed national, development beg the question -- don't we need to consider re-adapting a five-year planning process with a

medium term perspective plan? Why was it abandoned?

China is in the midst of implementing the 11th five-year plan, and India is busy preparing its own 11th five-year plan. Such a planning framework would serve the country better than the externally driven and ad-hoc prescriptions of the poverty reduction strategy paper or the policy support instrument. We need to have our policy in place first before it can be supported.

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Professional conduct

Absent reform of the recruitment process, rigorous training in professions and professional conduct, and strict enforcement of discipline in each profession, we cannot expect a sudden transformation in the code of conduct of our civil servants. But we surely can expect to stop recurrence of such behaviour in the future, if efforts are made now from ground up. The current environment seems to offer the most appropriate setting to fix a system that has been crying out loud for repair.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

BACK in the seventies when applying for a government scholarship for higher studies abroad (as a civil servant) I was required to state in one of the application forms whether I was in a professional or a non-professional cadre. The question nonplussed me as I was not aware that there was any job in the government that qualified as a non-professional.

When I raised this issue before the officer who was helping me in the application process, he replied sagely that the erstwhile Civil Service (by that time christened as Administrative Service) was not deemed as a professional cadre. He further informed me that the word "professional" only

applied to engineers, doctors, and other technical specialists. Members of the civil service -- that group of officials who represented the generalists -- were not "professionals." They were simply civil servants. I could not persuade my interlocutor to realise that civil service is also a profession, and that we are all professional civil servants.

This may sound facetious, but could it be that this gratuitous definition of "professionals" given by the Section Officer is the bane that afflicts our generalist civil service? Could it be that this definition actually helps a good many of our civil servants not to act as professionals, let alone grow or to follow the discipline of professionals?

I am led to this hypothesis from the news reports that I have seen of late of the remarks made to the press or public by two civil servants -- both still employed by the government. One -- a very senior civil servant has been reported to vent his spleen on his superiors after reassignment from a high-profile job. The other, a very junior officer in the totem pole, has reportedly

expressed his outrage in public at the loss of the magisterial power that his position had accorded to him following separation of judiciary from the executive, and directed his tirade at the highest court. Both were reacting to government decisions that as "professional" civil servants are obliged to obey, and not question, least of all challenge in public.

Unfortunately the erosion of social and moral values that we have witnessed over the past two decades has impacted our civil bureaucracy as much as other branches of the society. Political manipulation of the civil service, use of official power for personal gains, and partnership in corruption with political blessings have denuded the civil service of its pride, and fostered a culture of

survival of me-first above everything.

This did not happen overnight. This has happened from years of neglect of the civil service, highly flawed recruitment process, equally flawed training, and substitution of merit with political sycophancy. We cannot expect professional conduct from officials who have had no tradition to follow, no training in what professionalism entails, and who have been reared in an environment of self-promotion.

The combined result of these deleterious trends has presented us with a civil bureaucracy that can produce elements with behaviors that more befit political beings. This is why it is possible to have, from time to time, individuals who can translate their fifteen minutes of media fame to false assumptions of personal glory, leading to their hubris. This lack of training can also lead to equally false assumptions that the public offices they occupy are like fiefdoms. Thus, they are shocked when they are moved from their powerful positions. They react strongly, they are in

constant denial.

We cannot expect a Tariq bin Ziyad (conquering general of Spain), or a General McArthur among our civil servants who bowed their heads and gave up their positions at the command of superior authorities. The tradition of our civil service has been badly mauled by political manipulation and political pressure in the past decades. Absent reform of the recruitment process, rigorous training in professions and professional conduct, and strict enforcement of discipline in each profession, we cannot expect a sudden transformation in the code of conduct of our civil servants. But we surely can expect to stop recurrence of such behaviour in the future, if efforts are made now from ground up.

The current environment seems to offer the most appropriate setting to fix a system that has been crying out loud for repair.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Finally, my catharsis

For me, this opportunity, this turning point, gave me a chance to face a very old but still raging fear. I can't say that a victim of abuse is ever completely healed. But this experience allowed me the space to feel validated, vindicated and, frankly, not crazy. It was not my fault.

TERRI HATCHER

"M7. "Do you want to go with me?" asks my uncle. I wanted to go. I remember that I remember feeling excitement and shame simultaneously. In that moment, all I knew was that for some reason I wanted to be alone ... with him. We'd be driving to pick up my cousin. We'd pull over in some abandoned parking lot. He'd turn off the engine and suddenly that space in the car with the seats that go all the way across would become the scary and haunting locale of the most defining and damaging event in my life.

I tell you this story with trepidation. But my fear is far outweighed by what I know is my obligation to help other victims of sexual abuse to not feel alone. To inspire other victims to realise that their lives do not have to be paralysed by guilt and shame; they do not have to be defined by victimhood. And to convey to each and every damaged girl or woman that is not her fault. Unfortunately, many, many girls are victims of sexual abuse. So

even as we fight evil abroad, the evil of this abuse lives on in our neighbourhoods.

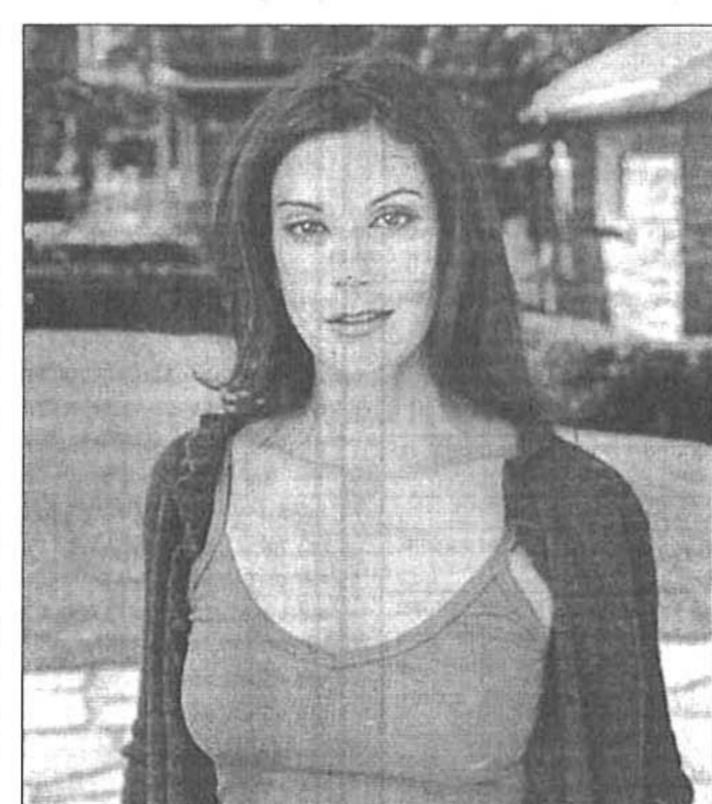
Rarely does an adult get to revisit and bring justice to a crime that happened more than 30 years ago. But that is exactly what I was able to do. It began when my parents were getting set to move from the Bay Area to southern California. Of course, in my middle-class family this involved a garage sale. I was sitting on the lawn trying to negotiate a quarter for all my dad's old T-shirts when my mom handed me a local newspaper she'd been saving. It seems that in January 2002, a 14-year-old girl named Sarah had wrapped her head in a towel and shot herself. Her suicide note implicated my uncle.

My uncle. What?! I thought.

And then so many things rushed through my mind. You mean he's been doing this all these years? It wasn't just me? Oh my God, that poor girl. I know everything she was feeling. I sat there in tears on my parents' lawn, numb. Then I got angry -- that my mother didn't show the paper to me earlier; that

I didn't put my uncle away when I was 7 years old. But, of course, no one did back then. "Back then." It makes me sound like an old person. But seriously, just 30 years ago, no one did. No one talked about any of that, and by the time I was conscious enough to know how wronged I'd been and how damaged I was as a result, well, the statute of limitations had flown by and my healing was only as close as \$150 an hour for years of sessions that luckily I could afford.

I went back to Los Angeles and spent a few restless nights dreaming of Sarah. And then I decided to call the D.A. in Santa Clara County who was working on the case. His name was Chuck Gillingham. I wasn't sure I even wanted to come forward with my story. I wasn't sure it would help or matter. But I called. When Chuck and I finally spoke, I didn't tell him who I was at first. I knew I had a lot to lose if this hit the tabloids: Terri Hatcher, screaming out for attention. It's pretty much ingrained in any victim of abuse that no one will believe them, and even if they do,



you feel you'll still somehow get blamed. And thus the cycle of pain.

For me, this opportunity, this turning point, gave me a chance to face a very old but still raging fear. I can't say that a victim of abuse is ever completely healed. But this experience allowed me the space to feel validated, vindicated and, frankly, not crazy. It was not my fault. If this has happened to you, you may want to contact the Rape, Abuse and

Incest National Network. I wish you strength and love, and a journey that leads to your own realisation that you are lovable, worthy and deserve good things. If it hasn't happened to you, count your blessings and do something in your community to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone you know.

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The price of suspicion

TRACY McNICOLL

"Hell is other people," Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his 1944 play "No Exit." Apparently his countrymen agree. A new book by two French economists says the French consistently have less trust in one another than almost any other people in the industrialised world.

According to surveys cited by the economists, Yann Algan and Pierre Cahuc, the French more easily justify accepting or paying bribes, buying stolen goods or collecting state handouts than political leaders? I guess it is a blend of all of that.

Adherence to professional conduct should be the hallmark of a civil servant. That professional conduct comes from tradition, training, dedication to work, and overall, from the belief that people judge civil servants them by their work ethic and values -- not by the power or authority they wield.

The broad vision, the web of interconnected strategies, and the required time perspective for rural, and indeed national, development beg the question -- don't we need to consider re-adapting a five-year planning process with a

more distrust. Today, firing or laying off employees is almost impossible in France, and the cost and complexity of doing so makes firms leery of hiring. In employers' eyes, every potential applicant becomes a future liability who can be hired only with extreme caution. Legislation protecting tenants has a similar effect. Landlords must be ever vigilant of prospective lessees because evicting defaulters is so exceptionally difficult compared with other industrialised nations. So despite an apparent housing shortage in Paris, apartment vacancy rates have been as high as 10 percent.

Distrust also extends to the powerful labour unions. Unions receive generous state subsidies and a lucrative hand in managing pension and insurance funds. But they are allowed to keep their financial records secret. And while a mere 8 percent of French workers are members, the unions can paralyse the country at will.

Allegations of corruption further undermine trust. In October, Denis Gautier-Sauvagnac, the metallurgy union president, stepped down from the talks after police began investigating him for allegedly suspicious withdrawals, totaling \$17 million, from the union bank account. He maintains he didn't pocket the money; it was used "to smooth relations." But with such stories, it's unsurprising that 25 percent of the French "don't trust unions at all," according to Algan and Cahuc.

With such a culture, can distrust ever become a thing of the past? French president Nicolas Sarkozy seems to be trying. He is now battling the unions in the first mass strikes since his election in May. Last week, in a bid to protect an early retirement entitlement for some public-sector employees, unions brought public transport across France nearly to a halt. Polls show weak public support. "We've always seen majority support for big strike action," says Gail Sliman, a pollster at the firm BVA. "For the first time, that is not the case." In part that's because in his attempt to reform, Sarkozy has already done something that nearly counts as revolution in distrustful France: he told voters what they were in for, and acknowledged that the reforms could be tough. That kind of straight talk may have earned him a little trust along the way.

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