

The crisis and coping capacity of the ultra-poor



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

It appears that only non-farm activities could hardly ensure sustainable food security of the ultra-poor households. Total reliance on the market for the purchase of food, in the absence of a substantial rise in agricultural or non-agricultural wage, might not benefit them. The other preconditions for uplift of the ultra-poor are the following: small household size, ownership of livestock and poultry, NGO credit and its proper utilisation in agriculture and non-agricultural operations and a diversified livelihood patterns.

In this column today, we shall present livelihood patterns of various types of poor households -- specially extreme or ultra poor -- in rural Bangladesh. The idea is to show that although the ultra-poor are seemingly homogeneous, but each type have different livelihoods and poverty dynamics. To this effect, from the list of ultra-poor households collected from 62 villages by a recent Brac-supported survey in 2008, we have randomly picked a few cases for closer look at poverty correlates, socio-demographic transition and poverty traps.

First, we consider two very poor persons, Fazlur Rahman and Prem Nath of Gopinathpur village under Badargonj upazila, Rangpur. They are of same age, 28, and married. Reportedly, in both cases, the wives are not engaged in any economic activity, not even as a secondary occupation. They claim to be housewives although data tend to reveal that they perform some economic activities such as livestock and poultry rearing, growing vegetables etc., in addition to their usual domestic activities.

Both Rahman and Nath spent 4-5 years in schools and their wives 7 years. Rahman has one child and Nath has two, all below school-

going age. The household size of both, at 3 and 4, is very small compared to Bangladeshi average. And, finally, they have one-room houses with tin-roofs, while the walls and floors are made of mud. And they use sanitary latrines.

According to social scientists, Rahman and Nath are ultra-poor owning, respectively, 3 and 6 decimals of inherited land. That means, they have only homestead land. Again, both the housewives joined NGOs two years ago. While Mrs. Rahman borrowed Tk.5,000 from Asa, Mrs. Nath borrowed Tk. 7,000 from two NGOs: Tk.4000 from Asa and Tk.3,000 from Grameen Bank. Rahman has no VGD card while Nath is lucky to have access to this facility.

By and large, both Rahman and Nath are alike in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, but they are different with regard to economic parameters and opportunities. As we shall see later, land and loans -- unless properly packaged -- are necessary, but not sufficient, condition to keep the poor on an even keel.

First, we start with the case of a pure tenant, Fazlur Rahman. The primary occupation of Rahman is operation of rented land supplemented by a secondary source of

income from van driving. He owns 3 cows, 3 goats and 3 poultry birds and earns Tk.400 per month from these sources. Mrs. Rahman looks after this side of income generation.

The NGO loan enabled Rahman to mortgage/lease land which, reportedly, improved the economic condition of the household. He mortgaged and leased 96 decimals to try a diversified cropping of HYV paddy in amon season, HYV paddy and wheat in boro season, and jute in aus season. In 2007, he got 30 maunds of paddy, 10 maunds of jute and 5 maunds of wheat.

His monthly income is roughly Tk. 3,200 distributed as follows: Crops Tk.750 (net of costs, besides family sustenance for rice), non-crop agriculture Tk. 400, van driving Tk.2,000 and others Tk.50. Rahman claims that his household is self-sufficient in rice as the total requirement of 720kg/year for the household comes from own production. That means the recent high prices of food grains hardly hit his household.

To store rice and other crops, Rahman created storage capacity in his one-room house. His family had eaten fish and meat for 2 and 3 days, respectively, in the week

preceding the days of the survey in February 2008.

He perceives that overall economic condition improved over the years, and his family can have three "satisfactory" meals during the year. The improvement in livelihood achieved over time was not knocked down even by the recent food crisis. How could that happen? Poor Rahman added a part of the positive gain to NGO credit that helped him mortgage in land. And, contrary to our conventional wisdom, Rahman considers himself as a poor person -- not ultra-poor -- which a researcher like myself will judge on the basis of land ownership and housing status.

We now turn to the case of a fisher man-cum petty trader, Prem Nath. He is not engaged in crop production, unlike the previous case, and having an additional member in the family also disadvantages him. There are some non-crop agricultural activities such as rearing 3 livestock, mostly by Mrs. Nath. His main occupation is fishing (9 months) supplemented by fish business (3 months). The major portion of two NGO loans (Tk. 3,000 + 4,000 = Tk.7,000) was spent on business, but seasonal and risky

fish business could not make much of a dent in his poverty.

However, his monthly income is estimated to be Tk. 2,350 -- 36% lower than Rahman's -- and is distributed as follows: Catching fish Tk.1,500 and trading fish in the market Tk.750, and Tk.104 from VGD. With this income, he has to purchase food to feed a family of four!

Prem Nath is not happy, although the household members can have three meals regularly during the year. They had no fish or meat in the diet in the week preceding the survey. Out of his total income, he had to spend Tk.1,600 (67%) for meeting rice need. In self-assessment, Nath placed himself as ultra-poor.

Take another case of a pure day labourer, Mohiruddin (40) and his wife (31) are older than the two heads of households sated earlier. The household size is also bigger -- 5 including the ailing mother of Mohir. The household owns 4 decimals of land and has been a member of Asa for eight years. The household currently had a loan of Tk. 13,000 but the whole amount was spent on the treatment of Mohiruddin's mother.

However, the rise in wage level in recent years paripassu the increased demand for agricultural labour reduced some of his economic hardships. His wife also serves as a household helper for others families.

The monthly income is estimated at Tk. 4,100 distributed as follows: Wage income Tk.2,000, spouse's income Tk.1,400 and old age pension + VGD Tk.600. Mohir perceives an improvement in economic condition -- not due to NGO loan spent on medical care -- but due to increased wages of the two earning members. Thus, a rise

in wage, to some extent, saved his household from the heat of high prices of food-grains.

In the fourth case, Mohammad Ali (28), a van driver, is the sole non-farmer. His wife, Begum (21), is a part-time household help for other families. The household size is 4, with no school-going children. Begum is a member of Asa, and last year took a loan of Tk. 5,000 for buying cattle.

The monthly income is about Tk. 2,700 distributed as follows: Tk. 25,00 from van, Tk. 133 from VGD and part-time job and Tk. 67 from others. Ali perceives an improvement from an NGO loan that enabled an increase in income from milk production. During the last one year, the household did not suffer deterioration in economic condition.

Finally, we have a widow, Olima Begum (55), who was once a member of an NGO, but not now. Olima looks after two grandchildren left by the daughter who works outside. After the death of husband, Olima rented a goat. She works as an agricultural labourer 6 months a year, and gets employment for 15 days a month. She is also involved in earthworks for 2 months and gets 25 days of work in a month.

Her average monthly income for a year is Tk. 1,500 distributed as follows: Tk. 375 from agricultural wage, Tk. 167 from earth work, Tk 500 sent by daughter to look after kids and Tk. 50 from VGD. Olima perceives no improvement, as there is no earning member or agricultural land. She has to buy rice worth Tk. 1,110/month, which is about three-fourths of her income. The increase in rice prices obviously made her economic condition worse.

Out of the five cases mentioned above, the resilience in Rahman is



worth noting. He is ultra-poor but receives no government grants. Rahman relies on both agriculture and non-agriculture for eking out a living. He accessed modern technology. Both husband and wife work very hard for a living. He also has a diversified system where both cash and subsistence crops are grown. The NGO loan was used to diversify his livelihood, with special emphasis on agriculture and food security as well as keeping a hand on non-farm activity.

Prem Nath, on the other hand, embarked on a seasonal but risky business and put all his eggs in one basket. He has to buy food from the market or wait for government dole. It is, therefore, not unlikely that the recent crisis has the household groaning under poverty. And it is not also unlikely that Prem Nath's household might go further down the poverty line if the crisis continues.

Mohiruddin and Md. Ali suffered serious blows from the illness of family members and large households. They have the problem of diversifying sources of income. Olima is a widow, and in

the absence of earning member her hardships override others.

It appears that only non-farm activities could hardly ensure sustainable food security of the ultra-poor households. Total reliance on the market for the purchase of food, in the absence of a substantial rise in agricultural or non-agricultural wage, might not benefit them.

The other preconditions for uplift of the ultra-poor are the following: small household size, ownership of livestock and poultry, NGO credit and its proper utilisation in agriculture and non-agricultural operations and a diversified livelihood patterns.

By and large, most borrowers benefited from NGO loans after investing in productive pursuits -- unless the loan was diverted for health or other crises as in the case of Mohir. To make an appropriate judgment on their changes in living conditions over a span of time, we shall have to go back to their pasts. Hopefully, we could do that in our next attempts.

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Revisiting the DU Order, 1973

Finally, the DU order 1973 was promulgated as President's Order no. 11 of 1973, which, however, was deemed to have taken effect on December 16, 1972. This piece of law provided for several elections to different bodies of the University and also to the office of the vice-chancellor. The raison d'etre of the formulation of the law and elections was to ensure institutional autonomy of the university, academic freedom of the teachers, and to inculcate among the teachers and the feeling of collegiate equality.

M. MANIRUZZAMAN MIAH

An article under the above caption by Dr. Kamal Hossain was published in the Daily Star of April 29. In his write-up, Dr. Hossain mentions the glorious past of Dhaka University in terms of its beautiful campus with magnificent buildings and, more importantly, its high academic standard "which earned it recognition as a centre of excellence of an international standard."

He goes on to recollect also the social role played by its academia and students in the language movement of 1952, which sowed the seeds of nationalism in this wing of the then Pakistan. He does not forget to touch on the historic role played by the DU teachers and students in the war of liberation of 1971.

Dr. Hossain's tribute to Dhaka University stops there. The learned jurist in the latter part of his narration expresses his utter dissatisfaction at the state of affairs in the universities of Bangladesh today. His views may be summarised as follows.

For the Gono Forum president, the teachers now have egregious

appetites for power politics for advancing their narrow self-interest and personal aggrandisement. He bemoans that vice-chancellors and others in powerful positions have acted as instruments of those in power. The net result of all this has led to doliokoron, or politicisation, in matters of appointments and promotions and in awarding of lucrative contracts.

He suggests that "the degeneration of the university of Dhaka through political patronisation in appointment and promotion, admissions and even granting of classes, and the patronisation of arms and party politics which reached deadly proportions in recent years must be seriously addressed."

Before we go on further, it would be better to note the tenor of Dr. Hossain's piece. He mentions that institutional autonomy to Dhaka University was granted by the DU order, 1973. It, itself, provided for elections to several bodies and high offices in the university, including that of the vice-chancellor. And the vice-chancellors themselves have become mere tools in the hands of the power that be in the coun-

ty. This has led to politicisation in the university, ultimately to armed conflicts on the campus, much to the deterioration of the general atmosphere and academic pursuit in this once-famous seat of learning.

To bring back the serenity and congenial atmosphere on the campus, the 1973 DU order which, according to the author of the writing, is the root cause, should be amended -- for which a process of consultation may be taken up. He suggests that the selection to the prestigious position of vice-chancellor may be made by a search committee.

While I do not wish to contradict any part of his review of the working of the DU order, 1973, Dr. Kamal Hossain, who himself is known as a gentleman par excellence, has been, in my opinion, less than kind to the vice-chancellors of the recent past. Rather than myself being embroiled in some such unwholesome controversy, I wish to make some comments on his suggestion of selection of vice-chancellors through a search committee. Here, we may recollect the backdrop against which the demand for autonomy was

submitted to the government. At that time, Dr. Kamal Hossain was the minister for law and parliamentary affairs to whom I, as secretary of the Teachers' Association, accompanied by Prof Wazihur Rahman went several times to lobby for our cause.

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Dr. Hossain now reveals after some 35 years that the prime minister had some reservation about too many elections in the university. We also heard on the grapevine about the PM's opinion, particularly debaring teachers from taking part in parliamentary election. While all may not agree, some on the campus, and possibly a large number of the students' guardians, were appreciative of the clairvoyance of the PM.

Anyway, at the very last, Dr. Hossain prescribes that the university vice-chancellors be selected through a search committee, and not through an elective process as they are now. It may be remembered that the Education Commission of 2003 suggested the idea of selection of vice-chancellor through a search committee.

For some time past, the government has been following a process of selection through a search committee. However, there is a wide difference between the search committee method followed by the government and the one recommended by the Commission. The pros and cons of the different approaches may be discussed. We strongly feel, though, that any major change in the existing law may be brought about only after a thorough and wide-ranging discussion with all stakeholders. For limitation of space we, however, leave a fuller discussion on the matter for some future occasion.

Teachers' representatives of the then East Pakistan also met in Dhaka to jointly put forward their demands. Came 1971. In 1972, with a new government in liberated Bangladesh, a committee was formed with Prof Razzaque at its head. Later that year, another committee with DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Mozaffar Ahmed as chairman was formed to consider the demands of the teachers for autonomy.

This committee, with Teachers' Association President Prof Habibullah on it as member, accepted all our demands. The draft of the proposed law was

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The vice-chancellor so appointed was given sweeping authority to run the university at his sweet will. Most important, what to speak of academic freedom, the teachers had no right to go to a court of law even to seek redress against any decision of the vice-chancellor, however arbitrary that might be. This was a draconian piece of law. Teachers were groaning under some such suffocating situation in the highest seat of learning here. Some distinguished professors had to quit the University under such unbearable circumstances. A few also left the University to take up jobs abroad.

Students, from time to time, raised their voice against the 1961 ordinance and demanded autonomy of the university. Teachers of the University came out unitedly in the wake of the anti-government agitation in 1969, demanding full autonomy of the university. Prof K S Murshid formulated a 14-point charter of demands defining the concept of autonomy. Over the next one year and a half teachers discussed various aspects of their demands, refined and finalised them.

A delegation on their behalf met Air Marshal Nur Khan, who was appointed by the new military regime to discuss demands by university teachers. Prof. Habibullah and Prof. Ahsanul Huq, president and secretary respectively of DU Teachers' Association visited West Pakistan to meet teachers' representatives of that wing to strengthen our claim for autonomy.

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Take off your hat but leave the rest of your clothes on, please

WE'D like to ask readers to remove their hats as a sign of respect before reading this column. Thank you. Today we are going to discuss an extremely solemn topic. (Cue church organ music.) We are going to talk about funerals. Or to be more precise, the most popular part of the North-East Asian funeral service, which is, of course, the stripshow.

People around the world are often highly amused (I use the word in its journalistic meaning of "horried") when they learn that scantily clad dancers are a regular feature of memorial services in Taiwan and parts of mainland China.

Indeed, visitors often express their delight with the sort of words that reader Anusha Nand used when I told her about it. "Ewww, that's totally sick," she enthused. As far as I can tell, this is unique to Asia, yet bafflingly has never been used as part of any tourism campaign. ("Asia: home of the sexy funeral.")

The tradition started about 20 years ago, when the Taiwanese mafia people who run the sleazy nightclub business took over significant sections of the island's mortuary business. One day, a bright spark who had probably been reading business self-help books decided to use "horizontal integration" to combine the two sectors and expand their income. From then on, anyone who booked a funeral through their company's mortician was entitled to an "exotic dancer" from the sister company at a deep discount.

Mourners responded with a confused "Huh?"

The mafia's business guy explained: "The presence of exotic dancers will greatly increase attendance at the funeral, you see, and thus show much respect for the dead."

Well, the first part of the sentence was true. Attendance grew, and the new style sexy funeral became fashion. A survey at the turn of the millennium indicated that at that time, between a quarter and a third of Taiwanese funerals included strippers.

The tradition spread to China, and the funerals of nondescript farmers in Jiangsu were soon attracting crowds of 200 or more mourners, expressing their heartfelt condolences by cheering and hooting respectful phrases such as: "Get 'em off." (I know you think I am making this up but I am not.)

About three years ago, Chinese officials discovered this was strictly against the Chinese constitution, which says something like, "We hold it self-evident that all men are equally prohibited from having any form of fun unless they have uniforms, in which case they can do anything they jolly well like." Officials have been trying to ban the habit since 2005, and sexy burials have now gone underground, so to speak.

However, the tradition continues in Taiwan. Cai Ruigong of that island recently hired a stripper to perform at the funeral of his father, who died at the age of 103. She danced for ten minutes in front of the coffin and was paid \$160. Cai told visitors that he felt it was the right thing to do, as the old man's favourite hobby, bless the dear old thing, had been visiting strip clubs and drooling from the frontrows.

Oh well, at least mourners in Taiwan can be sure that their deceased relatives are deceased. If the dearly departed's heart has not quite given out, it probably will after Little Golden Lotus Ming-Ming has shaken her flowers over him.

You are advised to remove your hat, and indeed all your garments, before visiting www.vittachi.com.



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