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Social inclusiveness for sustainable development

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SUSTAINABLE development can be achieved only through an integrated economic-social-political-environmental approach. Undoubtedly, economic growth is essential for improved living conditions of the people. But, for sustainability, prosperity must be equitably shared by all citizens. Otherwise, as is well known now, social disparity and political marginalisation accentuate. This outcome is unjust and unethical and a sure recipe for social tensions, even destabilisation; and, over longer run, the process is unsustainable.

In a broad sense, social exclusion may be defined as "the process through which individuals and groups are wholly or partially excluded from the society in which they live". In fact, the poor are disabled by their material disadvantage and constrained circumstances to participate meaningfully in socio-economic-political processes of advancement so that they get socially excluded. At the same time, social exclusion of, for example, ethnic minorities or physically handicapped through denial of economic, social, and political rights and opportunities can cause diverse deprivations to them as an instrumental process.

In the economic arena, social exclusion may take the form of a lack of access to land and other physical assets, credit, skills and labour markets, resulting in economic impoverishment of the affected people and condemning them to poor, even sub-human living conditions (in terms of, for example, undernourishment, ill-health, poor housing or homelessness, and unsanitary conditions). In the social aspect, exclusion may work in terms of discrimination on the basis of, for example, gender, ethnicity, mental and physical handicap, delinquency, and age so that the opportunities of those discriminated against for lifting themselves from their lowly living conditions are effectively reduced.

In the political context, exclusion occurs due to absence of people-centred democracy and in terms of denial of political rights such as political participation and the right to organise and also of personal security, freedom of expression, and equality of opportunity. The socially excluded are often deprived of legal redress of violations of their rights and denial of opportunities to them because either they cannot afford the costs or they are restrained by threats from the powerful perpetrators of injustices on them or their tormentors can bend the rules and laws in their own favour.

Social exclusion may be deliberately imposed by the government or a powerful social group on certain communities or groups. It also takes place through ongoing social processes without there being a deliberate attempt on the part of the government or any group of powerful people to exclude, while there may not also be deliberate public or private interventions to reverse the process of social exclusion of this nature.

When hierarchical levels of deprivations are interpreted to imply varying degrees of intensity of social exclusion, hierarchical (usually exploitative in nature) and lateral (e.g. those most disadvantaged may all be struggling to survive, using whatever little means they can command) social exclusion-based social relations immediately come to the fore. In this context, exclusion-related dynamics of different types and nature, as they relate to social exclusion of different intensity, need to be explored and brought to bear on the relevant policy making processes.

In Bangladesh, a large majority of the population is socially excluded in the sense of being left out from the ongoing socio-economic development process. It is ironic, indeed, that the large majority is socially excluded by a small minority. But this majority is atomistic and powerless, while the minority consists of organised groups of power elites who, between themselves, control the affairs

of the economy and of the state. The downtrodden majority suffers from high degrees of economic and social deprivations and political marginalisation. The deprived part of society in the country is also highly differentiated. That is, the deprived people are divided into many 'societies', depending on different degrees of limitations in relation to their economic circumstances, human capabilities, and access to education, health, employment, information, and financial resources as well as on different degrees and nature of their political marginalisation, all constraining their ability at different levels of severity to conduct necessary activities to break out of the deprivation syndrome.

To substantiate the above comments, a few statistics may be cited. As of 2005, about 40% of Bangladesh's total population was poor according to national poverty line. But, as a consequence of two major floods and a devastating cyclone in 2007, poverty in the country has both increased and deepened. One estimate shows an updated poverty ratio close to 50%, but it could be more. There has been a slide downward for all poverty categories and even for many from non-poor groups. The UNDP Human Development Report 2007/08 puts the proportion of population living on less than PPP\$1 per person/day at 41.3% and that below PPP\$2 per person/day at 84%. PPP\$1 is equivalent to Tk22.64 according to World Bank's revised PPP and poverty ratio estimates with reference to 2005. Although there may be question marks relating to the data and various parameters used in computing these figures, they surely indicate broad orders of magnitude. Clearly, the economic situation of the large majority of the people of Bangladesh is unpalatable, and for many of whom it is dire.

The economically deprived people of Bangladesh also suffer from social deprivations including illiteracy or poor primary education and negligible participation in tertiary education, ill-health; high levels of undernourishment and underweight among children as well as widespread undernourishment among adults; and high levels of infant and maternal mortalities.

Ethnic minorities and other small social groups suffer from human right deficits of various degrees in relation to various aspects of life and living. Women belonging to the downtrodden categories also suffer the indignities of

dowry requirements, torture at home, and trafficking on a wide-scale.

The children of the socially excluded often face crises of various kinds including insecurity against preventable and curable diseases, trafficking, child labour, and absolute lack of opportunities for self development.

The socially excluded are condemned as such due to systemic injustices which are, in general, more entrenched in the wake of neo-liberal reforms and globalisation. Social exclusion severely limits the abilities of the excluded to break out of the severe insecurity in human terms that they face and is manifested in their extreme vulnerability in relation to income, employment, food, health, education, environment and, above all, prospects for a better future. In other words, they are condemned by 'capability deprivation' into living in conditions unbecoming of human dignity.

They include the landless; unemployed and underemployed; employed but earning very low incomes; small artisans and informal sector operators; disadvantaged women; ethnic minorities; untouchables; mental and physically handicapped; disadvantaged people living in vulnerable coastal areas and river banks and hence on the frontline of severe natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, and river erosions; and other severely deprived groups.

The poor and socially disadvantaged people also suffer the most as a consequence of natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, storm surges, tornadoes, and droughts. Their ability to respond to the vulnerabilities caused by natural disasters is virtually non-existent; moreover, many of them live on marginal lands such as riverbanks, coastal and char areas, and arid or semi-arid lands. Therefore, they are at the forefront of the devastating impacts of natural disasters. The projected anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise will make things worse for them. As a consequence of extreme climatic events i.e. devastating natural disasters, which are likely to be more frequent and intense in future under climate change, the affected poor become destitute and many affected non-poor (i.e. those just above or not much above poverty lines) are forced to join the ranks of the poor as their few assets are lost, houses are washed away or damaged, employment opportunities collapse, and homesteads are

destroyed by river bank erosions and storm surges if they happen to live on those marginal lands. Relief and rehabilitation programmes undertaken by the government and others provide some succour to the people devastated by natural disasters and help them get back on their feet and resume toiling for eking out a living. But, it is often the case that sudden (caused by natural disasters) and endemic poverty together widen and deepen the poverty syndrome, as has happened as a result of two major floods and a devastating cyclone in the country in 2007.

The ongoing free market dynamics militate against the needs and interests of these people as they are outside the scheme of things in the mainstream. This is so, notwithstanding such internationally high profile poverty reduction programmes as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) prepared by many developing countries as required by the World Bank and IMF.

Now talk about the way forward to social inclusion and cohesive social transformation. Under the ruling paradigm, generally palliatives are offered to the excluded and deprived majority through various nationally and internationally designed poverty reduction and social development projects and programmes, implemented by the government and also by NGOs. The stated purposes of many of these programmes are good, even laudable. But, in most cases, people to be served are treated as target groups or objects and the underlying basic causes of their exclusion are not addressed.

However, there has also been much talk, often by the power elites themselves, with reference to the need for accelerating development and fast reducing poverty, about empowering people so that they can take control of their own destiny and make the best possible contributions to their own and national development. Also, many politicians have often pronounced, and correctly, that all citizens are entitled to equal opportunities and that they (the particular politicians) would ensure that such is actually the case. But, they usually have made such pronouncements at times of elections, ostensibly to woo the voters. In reality, these power elites have not usually walked their talks; and perhaps, these talks are not, in the first place, meant to be walked. However, some efforts are made to

empower some people in the country by various motivated citizens' groups working with the people within a framework of promoting the self-help concept and people's abilities in communities. But these localised efforts and the results achieved in the country remain negligible compared to the size of the population involved and the nature of the problems to be overcome.

Clearly, therefore, a paradigm shift to an inclusive, sustainable development pathway is called for. The goal to be achieved through this shift may be construed as the empowerment and well-being of all citizens on an equitable basis as well as ensuring the integrity and health of the environment, as opposed to the present reality of power and wealth of some and the exclusion of and ills for the majority and a deteriorating environment and intensifying climate change.

Focusing on social exclusion, the first key implication is that the socially excluded must be enabled to free themselves from the economic, social, and political conditions into which they have been condemned by the ruling paradigm. At the heart of freedom in this sense is empowerment. Quality education, basic health services, basic skill training, ownership of resources, employment, and access to information and appropriate technologies are among the key elements of empowerment. Reasonable levels of achievement in respect of various elements of empowerment would enable one to articulate their demands and work towards securing and expanding their freedoms from, for example, poverty and hunger, oppression, subjugation, lack of opportunities, capability deprivations, lack of access to resources and employment, and political marginalisation and exclusion. For sustainable productive employment of the unemployed and underemployed, the upgrading of their skills and commensurate infrastructural developments are required as economic operations expand. Safety-nets should be strengthened for those who, for health or age or other reasons, cannot participate in income earning activities.

For economic prosperity to be equitably shared as is required for sustainability of the economic process, the patterns of investment and production need to be reoriented towards those sectors (such as diversification of

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To summarise, five key concepts on which the proposed paradigm shift to an inclusive, sustainable development is anchored, as outlined above, are: freedom from the entrenched, debilitating socio-economic-political conditions; empowerment; shared prosperity; unity in diversity; and people's democracy.

