

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

'The most important thing is to build human capital'

Carel de Rooy has been Unicef Representative to Bangladesh since July 2008. He is responsible for the overall implementation of country programmes including planning, co-ordination and evaluation of a broad range of Unicef projects for the benefit of women and children. The Daily Star interviewed him prior to the budget of 2011-2012 fiscal year to learn how the national budget should focus on children.

Daily Star (DS): Why should the government prioritise investment in children in the annual national budget?

Carel de Rooy (CdR): The current challenge for Bangladesh is how to accelerate poverty reduction. If you consider that children constitute 45% of total population and 46% of them are poor, the most effective way to accelerate poverty reduction of a limited resource country is to improve the status of children through more investment. To accelerate poverty reduction you have to break the intergeneration poverty cycle, for which you have to target the children. If we don't target them they will remain poor and so will their children in future. If we look at the national budget, roughly 25% of the Annual Development Program (ADP) and 17% of social safety net budget are allocated for children. This is obviously inadequate. The most important thing is to build human capital because the most important asset Bangladesh has is human capital. One reality Bangladesh cannot escape is that it will have an additional 80 million children by 2050. If this is not done, those 80 million children would become a liability, a burden to the society.

DS: So it is not merely an issue of children?

CdR: It's an issue of political stability and viability of the country. Can Bangladesh be a viable country? Let me give you an example. There are 3.3 million children living in urban slums, and they have no access to education. It would be a big tragedy if they became criminals. The government can invest in them to maximise their potential and help them become responsible citizens. But this government, unfortunately, is repeating the same mistakes like governments in other countries of the world. The government's stance regarding these people can be defined as state of denial; that the slum dwellers should not be there, and if we do anything for them many more would join its strategy. Many countries, including Brazil, maintained these strategies pretending that the slum dwellers did not exist. Today, Brazil is paying a price -- a heavy price -- in terms of violence and drug smuggling because of this approach. One thing the politicians have to understand and learn from the experience of other countries is that poor people migrate for economic opportunities. They don't come here for basic services like school and health services. Whether you provide basic services or not they will still come. They will come as it happened in Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Nigeria,

Dakar, Senegal and Kenya. It's a part of the development process. It's part of becoming a middle-income country.

DS: Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) is claiming that children are being maimed for begging. Do you think this is linked to absence of government policy?

CdR: These things happen. You need to have a vision to deal with such a complex issue. The policy makers need to understand there is no alternative to urban development if they want to move towards a middle-income country. It will attract more people to the cities as lots of jobs will be created. Beating them up and putting them into prison shows a lack of vision. When human beings are desperate they can do anything -- kidnap, force people to beg, etc.

DS: How should the government go ahead with the investment in children?

CdR: I would say that in the next five years the government should increase the ADP for children. So triple the social safety net share and double the ADP. An example can be drawn with the most vulnerable children. If only 2.4% of social safety net budget and 0.3% of the national budget is spent for them for a period of ten years, living conditions and livelihood opportunities of the children would be rapidly improved. Ultimately, it's a question of political will. If the will is there it will be done. It's as simple as that.

DS: It is none but parents who engage their children in labour. What should be the process of dealing with it?

CdR: There are a number of things that can be done. First, the social norm of sending children of poor families to work should be changed. Parents of the poor children have to understand that having their children educated would increase their earning in future.

Second, the working poor children must be given the opportunity to get an education.

Another way could be reviving the stipend scheme. Before doing so we have to understand through a study the opportunity cost of child labour with regards to gender, age and geographical location. And then award stipend to all the kids of the area.

DS: You used the term child poverty, which is new to me. What does it stand for?

The normal way of looking at poverty is based on income -- income poverty. If you earn below a minimum level you will be considered as poor. Bangladesh has to look at poverty from another angle, the poverty resulting from deprivation of basic services. And while looking from this angle we consider whether or not children have access to water supply, sanitation, education, shelter, nutrition, health and information -- seven basic services. What we found in Bangladesh is that the lowest income groups are typically deprived of four of these services. From the child-poverty angle you will find there are small pockets in the country which are relatively well-off, but in the rest you have to invest.

DS: What do you suggest for the upcoming budget?

CdR: We suggest better targeting of resources. Geography related targeting, not quintile related targeting. Increase of budget doesn't have to be overnight. Since 2006 the budget for children has increased quite dramatically, almost four times. The overall budget has been increased but the proportion has not changed. If you want to break the intergeneration poverty cycle you should increase not the amount but the proportion of the budget targeting the children directly.

High food and fuel prices threaten gains in Asia

NOLEEN HEYZER and NAGESH KUMAR

ASIA and the Pacific, more than any other region in the world, will experience greater transformation and change in the coming years, as the region's economic strength plays a greater role in the global economy and as its population centres struggle to overcome the burdens of poverty, hunger, natural disasters and social inequalities. The region's economic growth figures, recently released in the UN ESCAP Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2011, indicate just how powerful Asia's economy is for the world already.

The Asia-Pacific region recovered strongly in 2010 from the global financial crisis and recession of 2008-09 with the region's developing economies growing at 8.8%. In 2011, growth in developing economies of the region is forecast to be 7.3% -- lower than 2010's high growth which represented a recovery from the low base of the 2009 recession.

Asia-Pacific remains by far the most dynamic growth region in the world, according to ESCAP, and the locomotive of global growth. Its growth rate this year will be nearly one and a half times more than any other region. While the region is led by the powerhouse developing economies of China and India, growing at 9.5% and 8.7% respectively, growth in 2011 is broad based at more than 5% across Asia-Pacific's sub-regions.

Despite these promising economic growth figures, Asia-Pacific still remains vulnerable to the risks posed by volatile short-term capital flows and the resurgence

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of food and fuel price inflation, and, as the tragic March 11 disaster in Japan underscores, natural disasters.

High food prices have direct impact on the region's poor. ESCAP estimates show that as many as 42 million additional people in the region are impoverished by 2011's high food and energy prices.

High oil prices could significantly reduce economic growth -- lowering predictions by up to one percentage point for some Asia-Pacific economies in 2011, especially vulnerable economies are Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and India.

For the poorest and most populated countries, high food and fuel prices will slow the effects of high economic growth helping families out of poverty. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals for poverty alleviation by 2015 could be delayed by five years in many countries, especially in Bangladesh, India, Lao PDR and Nepal.

Countries can take immediate policy steps to moderate the impacts of rising food and fuel prices on our region's poorest people:

At the national level, lowering tariffs and taxes will reduce prices and social protection measures should be undertaken in the form of food vouchers, income transfers and school feeding programmes to reduce the burden on the poor. Government buffer stocks of commodities should be utilised when market supplies are low.

Over the longer term, all countries must focus on enhancing support for agricultural R&D and rural credit for fostering a new, knowledge-intensive green revolution. Such strategies will not only boost food supplies, but will also assist the poorest communities, where sustainable agricultural development remains a reliable anti-poverty strategy.

Global initiatives, regional and sub-regional groupings should back up national strategies. The G20, the world's major economic policy forum, could act to discipline speculative activity in food and fuel commodities and conversion of cereals into biofuels. For oil price volatility, the G20, being the group of all major consumers, including eight members from Asia and the Pacific, may engage Opec -- the group of major oil producers -- to demarcate a benchmark "fair" price of oil and seek an agreement to restrict oil price movements within a band around it, besides creating a global strategic oil reserve to moderate the volatility of oil prices.

Another challenge for Asia-Pacific economies is to generate more aggregate demand in the region to mitigate some loss of demand from developed economies as they restrain their debt-fuelled consumption. Inclusive development policies like poverty reduction and social protection can enhance domestic demand.

Furthermore, the emergence of Asia-Pacific region as the growth pole of the world economy means the importance of regional economic integration cannot be over-emphasised. The time has come to take a broader approach which focuses not just on deepening integration within subregions but also in fostering trade and business links to build a seamless Asia-Pacific economic space.

Working together, the Asia Pacific region can shape the forces of the present economic recovery by investing in its people, and by implementing social protections as a mainstay of national development. Asia Pacific is a leader in the global economy, and it now has the opportunity to safeguard the development gains of its people.

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Growing up with confidence

AMINUL ISLAM SWAPON

SELF-confidence is a major key to success in life. The development of a positive self-concept or healthy self-confidence is extremely important to the happiness and success of children and teenagers. Self-confidence is how we feel about ourselves, and our behaviour clearly reflects those feelings. For example, a child or teen with high self-confidence will be able to:

- Act independently;
- Assume responsibility;
- Take pride in his accomplishments;
- Tolerate frustration;
- Attempt new tasks and challenges;
- Handle positive and negative emotions;
- Offer assistance to others.

On the other hand, a child with low self-confidence will:

- Avoid trying new things;
- Feel unloved and unwanted;
- Blame others for his own shortcomings;
- Feel, or pretend to feel, emotionally indifferent;
- Be unable to tolerate a normal level of frustration;
- Put down his own talents and abilities;
- Be easily influenced.

Parents, more than anyone else, can promote their child's self-confidence. Most parents do it without even realising that their words and actions have great impact on how their child or teenager feels about himself. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind.

Parents are often quick to express negative feelings to children but somehow don't get around to describing positive feelings. A child doesn't know when you are feeling good about him or her and he or she needs to hear you tell him or her that you like having him or her in the family. Children remember positive statements we say to them. They store them up and "replay" these statements to themselves.

Parents must be generous with praise. You must of course look for situations in which your child is doing a good job or displaying a talent. You mustn't lose our temper.

Teach your child to practice making positive self-statements. Self-talk is very important in everything we do. Psychologists have found that negative self-talk is behind depression and anxiety. What we think determines how we feel and how we feel determines how we behave. Therefore, it is important to teach children to be positive about how they "talk to themselves."

Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame. Sometimes it is necessary to criticise a child's actions, and it is appropriate that parents do so. When, however, the criticism is directed to the child as a person it can easily deteriorate into ridicule or shame. It is important to learn to use "I statements" rather than "You statements" when giving criticism.

Teach your child about decision-

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making and to recognise when he/she has made a good decision. Children make decisions all the time but often are not aware that they are doing so. There are a number of ways parents can help children improve their ability to consciously make wise decisions:

- Help the child clarify the problem that is creating the need for a decision. Ask him questions that pinpoint how he sees, hears, and feels about a situation and what may need to be changed;
- Brainstorm the possible solutions. Usually, there is more than one solution or choice to a given dilemma, and the parent can make an important contribution by pointing out this fact and by suggesting alternatives if the child has none;

- Allow the child to choose one of the solutions only after fully considering the consequences. The best solution will be one that solves the problem and simultaneously makes the child feel good about himself or herself;
- Later, join the child in evaluating the results of that particular solution. Did it work out well? Or did it fail? If so, why? Reviewing the tactics will equip the child to make a better decision the next time around.

Develop a positive approach to providing structure for your child. All kids and teens need to accept responsibility for their behaviour. They should learn self-discipline. To help children learn self-discipline, the parent needs to adopt the role of coach/teacher rather than that of disciplinarian and punisher.



JIM EDMON

Ten additional steps parent can take to help their child develop a positive self-confidence:

- Teach your children to change their demands to preferences. Point out to them that there is no reason they must get everything they want and that they need not feel angry either. Encourage them to work against anger by setting a good example and by reinforcing them when they display appropriate irritation rather than anger;
- Encourage your children to ask for what they want assertively, pointing out that there is no guarantee that they will get it. Reinforce them for asking and avoid anticipating their desires;

- Let children know they create and are responsible for any feeling they experience. Likewise, they are not responsible for others' feelings. Avoid blaming children for how you feel;
- Encourage your children to develop hobbies and interests which give them pleasure and which they can pursue independently;
- Let children settle their own disputes between siblings and friends alike;
- Help your children develop "tease tolerance" by pointing out that some teasing can't hurt. Help children learn to cope with teasing by ignoring it while using positive self-talk such as "names can never hurt me," "teases have no power over me," and "if I can resist this tease, then I'm building emotional muscle;"
- Help children learn to focus on their strengths by pointing out to them all the things they can do;
- Encourage your children to behave towards themselves the way they would like their friends to behave towards them;
- Help your children think in terms of alternative options and possibilities rather than depending upon one option for satisfaction. The more you help them realise that there are many options in every situation, the more you increase their potential for satisfaction;
- Laugh with your children and encourage them to laugh at themselves. A good sense of humour and the ability to make light of life are important ingredients for increasing one's overall enjoyment.

Parents should realise the importance of developing a strong, positive self-confidence early in childhood. This increases a child's chances for health, happiness, and success in school, sports, relationships -- in all areas of life. Although self-confidence can be improved at any age, the earlier we start the better.

The writer was a teacher in South Africa.