

BANGLADESH AND DEVELOPMENT

The path through the fields

Bangladesh has dysfunctional politics and a stunted private sector. Yet it has been surprisingly good at improving the lives of its poor.

ON the outskirts of the village of Shibaloy, just past the brick factory, the car slows to let a cow lumber out of its way. It is a good sign. Twenty years ago there was no brick factory, or any other industry, in this village 60 kilometres west of Dhaka; there were few cows, and no cars. The road was a raised path too narrow for anything except bicycles.

Now, Shibaloy has just opened its first primary school; it is installing piped water and the young men of the village gather to show off their motorcycles at the tea house. "I have been a microcredit customer for 17 years," says Romeja, the matriarch of an extended family. "When I started, my house was broken; I slept on the streets. Now I have three cows, an acre of land, solar panels on the roof and 75,000 taka (\$920) in fixed-rate deposits."

Bangladesh was the original development "basket case," the demeaning term used in Henry Kissinger's state department for countries that would always depend on aid. Its people are crammed onto a flood plain swept by cyclones and without big mineral and other natural resources. It suffered famines in 1943 and 1974 and military coups in 1975, 1982 and 2007. When it split from Pakistan in 1971 many observers doubted that it could survive as an independent state.

In some ways, those who doubted Bangladesh's potential were right. Economic growth since the 1970s has been poor; the country's politics have been unremittingly wretched. Yet over the past 20 years, Bangladesh has made some of the biggest gains in the basic condition of people's lives ever seen anywhere. Between 1990 and 2010 life expectancy rose by 10 years, from 59 to 69.

Bangladeshis now have a life expectancy four years longer than Indians, despite the Indians being, on average, twice as rich. Even more remarkably, the improvement in life expectancy has been as great among the poor as the rich.

Bangladesh has also made huge gains in education and health. More than 90% of girls enrolled in primary school in 2005, slightly more than boys. That was twice the female enrolment rate in 2000. Infant mortality has more than halved, from 97 deaths per thousand live births in 1990 to 37 per thousand in 2010. Over the same period child mortality fell by two-thirds and maternal mortality fell by three-quarters. It now stands at 194 deaths per 100,000 births. In 1990 women could expect to live a year less than men; now they can expect to live two years more.

The most dramatic period of improvement in human health in history is often taken to be that of late-19th-century Japan, during the remarkable modernisation of the Meiji transition. Bangladesh's record on child and maternal mortality has been comparable in scale.

These improvements are not a simple result of increases in people's income. Bangladesh remains a poor country, with a GDP per head of \$1,900 at purchasing-power parity.

For the first decades of its independent history Bangladesh's economy grew by a paltry 2% a year. Since 1990 its GDP has been rising at a more respectable 5% a year, in real terms. That has helped reduce the percentage of people below the poverty line from 49% in 2000 to 32% in 2010. Still, Bangladeshi growth has been slower than India's, which for most of the past 20 years grew at around 8% a year.

Nevertheless the gains in its development have been greater. The belief that growth brings development with it -- the "Washington consensus" -- is often criticised on the basis that some countries have had good growth but little poverty reduction. Bangladesh embodies the inverse of that: it has had disproportionate poverty reduction for its amount of growth.

How has it done it?

Four main factors explain this surprising success. First, family planning has empowered women. If you leave aside city states, Bangladesh is the world's most densely populated country. At independence, its leaders decided that they had to restrain further population growth (China's one-child policy and India's forced sterilisation both date from roughly the same time).

Fortunately, Bangladesh's new government lacked the power to be coercive. Instead, birth control was made free and government workers and volunteers fanned out across the country to distribute pills and advice. In 1975, 8% of women of child-bearing age were using contraception (or had partners who were); in 2010 the number was over 60%.

In 1975 the total fertility rate (the aver-

age number of children a woman can expect to have during her lifetime) was 6.3. In 1993 it was 3.4. After stalling, it resumed its fall in 2000. After one of the steepest declines in history the fertility rate is now just 2.3, slightly above the "replacement level" at which the population stabilises in the long term. When Bangladesh and Pakistan split in 1971, they each had a population of 65m or so. Bangladesh's is now around 150m; Pakistan's is almost 180m.

Because of this Bangladesh is about to reap a "demographic dividend;" the number of people entering adulthood will handsomely exceed the number of children being born, increasing the share of the total population that works.

In giving women better health and more autonomy, family planning was one of a number of factors that improved their lot, and by so doing did much to reduce poverty. The spread of primary education was one of the others (the government has been better than many at helping women this way); the propor-

Bangladesh comes 120th (out of 183) on the "corruption perceptions index" kept by Transparency International, a think-tank in Berlin. It has had episodes of military rule interrupting periods of democracy in which the "battling begums" (daughter and widow of two early presidents) engaged in a sort of Judy and Judy show of vicious political infighting.

Yet despite the political circus, the country's elite has maintained a consensus in favour of social programmes. Bangladesh spends a little more than most low-income countries on helping the poor. About 12% of public spending (1.8% of GDP) goes on social safety-nets to protect the poorest: food for work, cash transfers and direct feeding programmes, which most poor countries do not have. As well as spending more on the poor, the state also focuses more than many on the role of women.

That said, the amounts that go on education (2.2% of GDP) and health (3.5%) in Bangladesh are below the aver-

age household in the country showing mothers how to mix salt, sugar and water in the right proportions to rehydrate a child suffering from diarrhoea.

This probably did more to lower child mortality in the country than anything else. Brac and the government jointly ran a huge programme to inoculate every Bangladeshi against tuberculosis. Brac's primary schools are a safety net for children who drop out of state schools. Brac even has the world's largest legal-aid programme: there are more Brac legal centres than police stations in Bangladesh.

The scale is a response to one of the biggest challenges of development: that solving one problem leads to others. This happens in economic development as well as the social kind. In the 1950s South Korea's Samsung had a big woolen mill. It found that to expand, it had to make its own textile machinery; then, to export, it built its own ships; and so on. Samsung now has around 80 companies and is the world's largest information-technology firm. Brac is a sort of chaebol (South Korean conglomerate) for social development. It began with microcredit, but found its poor clients could not sell the milk and eggs produced by the animals they had bought. So Brac got into food processing. When it found the most destitute were too poor for micro-loans, it set up a programme which gave them animals. Now it runs dairies, a packaging business, a hybrid-seed producer, textile plants and its own shops -- as well as schools for dropouts, clinics and sanitation plants.

The innovative NGO now has 100,000 health volunteers with mobile phones (mobile-phone coverage is widespread in Bangladesh). When a volunteer finds a woman is pregnant, she texts the mother-to-be with advice on prenatal and, later, postnatal care. This is helping Brac build up a database of maternal and child-health patterns in remote villages.

Brac goes out of its way to involve everyone. When it set up a programme for the ultra-poor in Shibaloy, the whole village gathered to decide who should be eligible. They drew a map of the households in the dirt so everyone could see who was involved and ensure that nobody was missed. Brac argues that such things encourage a sense of ownership of the programmes and reduces waste and corruption.

A balance-sheet
Bangladesh still has formidable problems. Its nutritional standards are low and stalled for a few years in the early 2000s. While the government has managed to increase school enrolment, the quality of education is abysmal and the drop-out rate exceptionally high (only 60% of pupils complete primary school, much less than the regional average). Only a quarter of eleven-year-olds have reached the required standards of literacy and numeracy.

Most of the big improvements have taken place in rural areas, but Bangladesh is urbanising fast, which will bring a different suite of problems. Dhaka is one of the ten largest cities in the world, but has the infrastructure of a one-buffalo town.

And as if all that were not enough, the government seems intent on killing one of the geese that lays the golden eggs. Incensed that the founder of Grameen Bank, Muhammad Yunus, should have had the temerity to start a political party, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has hounded him from his position as the bank's managing director and is seeking to impose her own choice of boss on the bank, overriding the interests of the owner-borrowers. This is sending a chilling signal to other NGOs.

But Bangladesh's record is, on balance, a good one. It shows that the benefits of making women central to development are huge. It suggests that migration is not just the result of a failure to provide jobs at home but can be an engine of economic growth. India's rural-development minister, Jairam Ramesh, said recently that "Bangladesh's experience shows... that we don't have to wait for... high economic growth to trigger social transformations. Robust grassroots institutions can achieve much that money can't buy."

Bangladesh is still poor and crowded. With the lowest labour costs in the world (textile workers make about \$35 a month) it should be growing faster than China, not more slowly than India. It is badly governed, stifled by red tape and faces severe environmental problems. But in terms of the success of its grassroots development, it has lessons for the world.

Out of the basket

IN 1976, five years after independence, a book appeared called "Bangladesh: The Test Case of Development." It was a test, the authors claimed, because the country was such a disaster that if development could be made to work there, it could surely work anywhere. At the time, many people feared Bangladesh would not survive as an independent state. One famine, three military coups and four catastrophic floods later, the country that Henry Kissinger once dismissed as "a basket case" is still a test. But no longer in the sense of being the bare minimum that others should seek to surpass. Now, Bangladesh has become a standard for others to live up to.

As our briefing points out, in the past 20 years Bangladesh has made extraordinary improvements in almost every indicator of human welfare. The average Bangladeshi can now expect to live four years longer than the average Indian, though Indians are twice as rich. Girls' education has soared, and the country has hugely reduced the numbers of early deaths of infants, children and mothers. Some of these changes are among the fastest social improvements ever seen.

Remarkably, the country has achieved all this even though economic growth, until recently, has been sluggish and income has risen only modestly.

Bangladesh might seem like a special case. Because of its poverty, it has long been a recipient of vast amounts of aid. With around 150m people crammed into a silted delta frequently swept by cyclones and devastating floods, it is the most densely populated country on Earth outside city states. Hardly any part is isolated by distance, tradition or ethnicity, making it easier for anti-poverty programmes to reach everyone. Unusually, it has a culture that is distinct from its religion: although most Bangladeshis are Muslims, their culture and language are shared with the non-Muslim Indian state of West Bengal. Religious opposition to social change has been mild. Not many nationalities have so unusual a collection of traits.

The female factor: That said, the most important of the country's achievements can serve as a model for others. Bangladesh shows what happens if you take women seriously as agents of development. When the country became independent, population-control policies were all the rage (this was the period of China's one-child policy and India's forced sterilisations). Happily lacking the ability to impose such savage restrictions, the government embarked instead upon a programme of voluntary family planning. It was stunningly successful. It not only halved the rate of fertility

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within a generation, but also increased women's influence within their own households. For the first time, wives controlled the size of families.

Later, the textile industry took off -- and four-fifths of its workers are female. Bangladesh was also the home of microcredit, tiny loans for the poorest. By design, these go to women. Thus, over the past two decades women have earned greater influence in the home and more financial autonomy. And, as experience from round the world shows, women spend their money differently from men: typically, on their children's food, health and education. Child welfare has been underpinned by a quiet revolution in the role of women.

That is not all there was to it. Thanks to remittances from abroad and to the Green Revolution, Bangladesh has done better than most at reducing persistent rural poverty. It has maintained a broad consensus in favour of basic social spending despite military coups and a toxic politics dominated by the bitter infighting of the "battling begums" (the widow and daughter of former presidents, who lead the two main parties). Bangladesh has also benefited by letting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) get on with what the state itself has been too weak or corrupt to do: experiment with different programmes and scale up those that work.

Much of its success is attributable to local NGOs like Grameen and BRAC.

Bangladesh has shown that countries can transform the lives of the poorest without having to wait for economic growth. But it does not show that growth is irrelevant. The country would surely have done better still if its economy had expanded faster, as it could have done. As people's education and expectations rise further, it will be all the more important to provide new jobs and opportunities for advancement.

Delta force: Moreover, Bangladesh's achievements remain vulnerable to political interference. The prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, is vindictively meddling with Grameen Bank, removing its boss and trying to impose her own choice upon the institution's shareholders -- all to punish its founder, Muhammad Yunus, for daring to think of setting up a political party. She is sending a chilling effect through the country. Bangladesh has become a model of what can be done, despite her government's corrupt, poisonous politics. It would be a tragedy if it once again became an example of what not to do.