

SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Subsidy to poor or local government?

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

ANY will be surprised to hear that some of the Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) seem to be the subsidies from the government to the local level authorities, and these programmes ultimately have become the tool for exploitation.

In plain eyes, it will seem that these schemes have created some scopes for ill businesses for the people who get only Tk.950 a month as honorarium after being elected in the Union Parishad elections; through spending a huge amount of money to be elected.

Though the national level political settlement has a very complex diagram in Bangladesh, it is not the same for the local one; people here sell their votes to the local leaders in UP election and they buy safety-net programme allocation cards from those who are elected -- thus reflecting a pure business motive.

This business is profitable for both of the parties but, in between all this, the extreme poor -- targeted ones for these particular programmes -- are deprived; as the card buyers are not the exact target group. This is how the safety net programmes, being poorly managed, are not reaching their target.

Of course there are some exceptional good beings in the Union Parishads but if one came to know that each UP chairman earns Tk.1 crore in his or her five-year tenure, everyone in this capitalistic era would be interested to invest millions to become a UP chairman, who is otherwise meant to get only around Tk.1,500 as honorarium.

I had the privilege to visit some of the UP leaders i.e. members and chairmen recently. Almost in all the cases, I received a demand of increasing the honorarium for them. Nine hundred and fifty taka is nothing for them; given the millions they are required to spend.

One chairman reported that he needs to spend Tk.2,000 a day for charity. But he could not give a convincing answer as to why he does this and why, if it is financially not profitable, he is standing for election again.

Safety net programmes have some major objectives in any capitalist economy, one of which is helping the most economically vulnerable so that they do not fall below the certain level of poverty and the capitalist market can in any manner cover them in its transaction cycle.

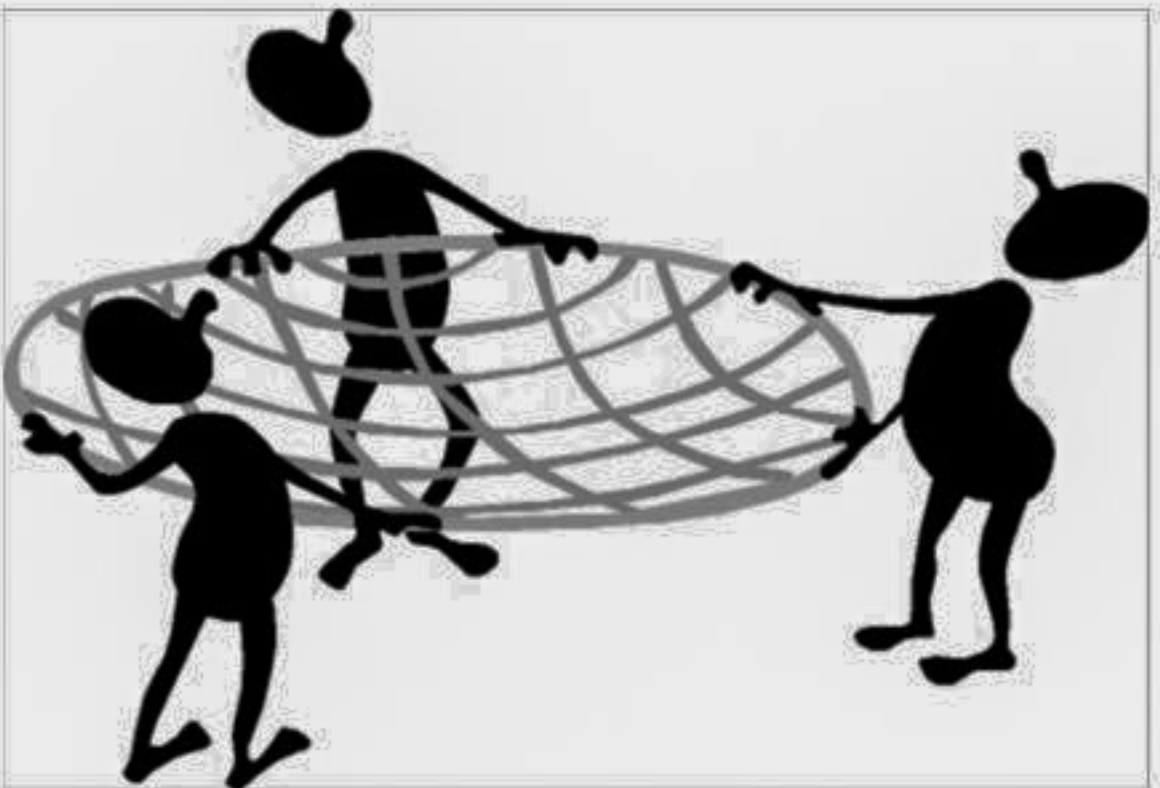
But the amount we spend for these schemes are too poor to reach the target; even partially. So, there are two major challenges for these programmes in this country: the amount given is so small that it

cannot even meet the first one among the basic demands and, secondly, there is so much corruption involved that we cannot target the proper people; rather as a byproduct we end up creating the scope for some to make illegal money.

But what are the costs in the failure of targeting the extreme poor and encouraging corruption? The average rate of spending for social protection by the governments is 1% of the GDP but in the proposed budget of Fiscal Year (FY) 2012-2013 of Bangladesh it is 2.18% when it was 2.40% in the revised budget of FY 2011-12.

In this FY, the government has allocated Tk.22,750.55 crore for social protection.

Many of the safety net programmes are directly



**If one came to know that each UP chairman earns Tk.1 crore in his or her five-year tenure, everyone in this capitalistic era would be interested to invest millions to become a UP chairman, who is otherwise meant to get only around Tk.1,500 as honorarium.**

handled by the local government, where some fresh Union Parishad chairmen and members have been elected. Some of the major programmes they handle are Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Food For Work (FFW), Test Relief (TR), Gratuitous Relief (GR) etc. which together account for Tk. 5,035.67 crore that is 2.63 of this year's national budget.

At the local level, more than half of the safety net allocation cards are distributed with bribes and those providing the bribe to the Union Parishad member can never reach the true target people of these services. This epidemic practice of Bangladesh is breaking the social contact between the common people and the elected people and thus we are devi-

ating from the major objective of these mighty programmes.

The poor people often take loans from the loan shirks with high interest rates for bribing the UP leaders (members). But definitely it is not applicable for everyone, in fact I have seen a number of UP leaders who even spend from their own resources for the common people.

It is astonishing to know that most of the UP members, especially the female ones, know that their only responsibility is card distribution and they cannot even name any other responsibility they need to perform as an elected UP member. After a year as a UP, it is very natural to expect them to know their roles and responsibilities properly and perform those duties accordingly. But it will not be wise to blame them at random; rather we need to also look deeply into what we have done to develop their capacity.

Now the time has come perhaps to assess the effectiveness and performance of these safety net programmes. We need to see to what extend we have been able to address the expected objectives: whether these schemes are destroying the mentality of the local leaders, why these programmes are being operated under a number of ministries, whether these have become the tools for local elites and politicians to exploit the poor further, who are really benefitting from the money, and what exactly we need to do now.

In this regard, the recent report findings of IFPRI are also frustrating.

Strengthening local government has no alternative to rural development or even overall development of the country. Decentralisation of government is essential for a country like Bangladesh where 16 crore people are living within a very small land area.

Limited resources are making people greedy and also, in trying to over reach that, the gap between the poor and rich is always increasing at a high pace for the same reason.

In the name of social protection we cannot harm the poor further, rather it is mandatory to have strong coordination among and proper implementation of all 90 programmes by capacitating and strengthening the local government bodies where sincerity of the government should be a pre-condition.

The writer is a Development Researcher and a Technical Coordinator at CARE. The opinions expressed here do not reflect any of the organisation.

Email: mithunmds07@gmail.com



Close to ending neglected tropical diseases

BE-NAZIR AHMED

MILLIONS of people in Bangladesh, and more than a billion around the world, are afflicted by a group of debilitating diseases known as neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). Though not always fatal, NTDs can cause life-changing disability and disfigurement, subjecting patients to stigma and discrimination, as well as broad reaching economic effects for both their families and their communities.

I have spent my career working to protect Bangladeshis from these terrible afflictions, and I am proud to say that I have never seen such dedication. With the government standing behind the cause and the partnership of international organisations, we are seeing a new era in NTDs -- one that promises a brighter future for Bangladesh.

On January 30, 2012, Minister of Health and Family Welfare Professor AFM Ruhul Haque stood with Bill Gates, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan, the CEOs of 10 leading pharmaceutical companies and others to launch the London Declaration on NTDs: a promise to work together to reach WHO's target of controlling and eliminating 10 NTDs by 2020.

Commitments ranged from donors promising crucial funds, the private sector donating lifesaving drugs, and country governments agreeing to find effective ways to deliver needed health services.

These commitments are critical to improving the lives of 500 million children worldwide, including millions in Bangladesh -- and they are being met. A new report issued to mark the first anniversary of the London Declaration shows that partners across the world are living up to their promises and getting the funds, drugs and plans together to combat NTDs.

This has involved some impressive steps. Two companies, GlaxoSmithKline and Johnson & Johnson, delivered almost 200 million more free tablets of deworming pills in 2012 to new programmes in 29 countries. And more than 40 countries have designed new multi-year, integrated NTD programmes, with four countries launching their plans in 2012.

Here in Bangladesh, the government has made significant progress fighting NTDs. For example, from 1995 to 2006, 45 districts reported an annual average of 20,000 cases of visceral leishmaniasis, an often-fatal and disfiguring disease spread by sandfly bites.

Thanks to programmes like indoor residual spraying, distribution of long lasting insecticide nets, active searching of cases and management of a wide range of drugs, cases of visceral leishmaniasis dropped to less than 2,000 in 26 districts in 2012.

These diseases have been around for thousands of years, so to beat them we have had to be creative. To combat soil-transmitted helminthes (STH) -- worms that can cause serious growth and learning delays in infected school-aged children -- the government has developed and financed an innovative programme centered on "Little Doctors."

The programme encourages child-to-child education about health and deworming by training students in upper grades to assist teachers on twice-yearly deworming days. In partnership with the non-profit organisation Children Without Worms, the programme currently provides mebendazole to 24 million school-age children annually. This is just one part of Bangladesh's broader STH programme, which scaled up in 2012 to cover the entire country for the first time.

The government also set a goal of eliminating rabies -- which still causes around 2,000 deaths a year, mostly of children in rural areas -- by 2020. Since making this commitment, the government has performed mass vaccination on dogs, which transmit the disease, in 38 districts and will continue to scale up vaccination and dog population management.

While results so far have been impressive, more needs to be done. Research and development into new ways of treating, preventing and diagnosing NTDs still has far to go. Along with a worldwide US\$300 million annual funding gap, there are still inadequate human resource and technical capacities. And the political and financial commitment that Bangladesh has shown to NTDs needs to be duplicated in other countries that have fragmented, incomplete programmes.

Nigeria's recent announcement that they will launch an integrated programme is great progress, but more needs to follow for us to truly wipe these diseases from the earth.

Bangladesh has established itself as a model to achieve elimination of NTDs in a resource-constrained setting, by largely funding and implementing its own programmes, but there's more we can do.

Last January, Bangladesh pledged to drafting and implementing its own fully integrated plan to control and eliminate NTDs based on WHO's guidance. It has already achieved remarkable progress in STH control and in lymphatic filariasis, visceral leishmaniasis and rabies elimination.

With support from a continually expanding group of partners, and the progress underway at home, Bangladesh can achieve and sustain the elimination of NTDs.

The writer is Disease Control and Line Director, CDC, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Questions on Rooppur nuclear deal

PETER CUSTERS

FEW critical questions have been raised so far by Bangladesh's intellectual community regarding the deal towards the construction of the two nuclear power plants in Rooppur.

Yet questions do need to be posed. On November 2 last, Russia and Bangladesh signed the long-awaited nuclear power agreement on the supply of two 1,000 Megawatt reactors. Significantly, the deal was closely followed up by a major defence deal worth US\$1 billion for the delivery of armoured vehicles, transport helicopters and other weaponry. This last deal was sealed during Sheikh Hasina's recent Moscow visit.

The given pattern -- of a deal facilitating the purchase and transfer of nuclear technology paving the way for enlarged armament transfers -- is broadly similar to the pattern set by the US and India when they signed their framework agreement on nuclear cooperation in 2008.

Here, an expansion in US exports of armaments to India was the hidden, reverse side of the nuclear deal. And while ostensibly there is no direct link between the two types of trade, both the US and Russia evidently are equally eager to enlarge both their sales of nuclear technology and of weaponry towards countries of the Global South.

Yet whether the Rooppur deal and the sequential defence deal -- both involving huge sums of public money -- are really in the interests of Bangladesh is a question that need to urgently be scrutinised.

Here I will limit myself to last November's deal on Rooppur, which Bangladesh's nuclear lobby undoubtedly will have celebrated as a grand success. After all, the dream to provide Bangladesh with nuclear energy is longstanding, dating from the time Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan.

The first critical point to be noted is the fact that few details regarding the contents of the nuclear agreement have been revealed to Bangladesh's public. From the 'self-evaluation report' submitted by Bangladesh to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the middle of 2012, however, it appears that the two nuclear reactors to be supplied by Russia to Bangladesh will be of VVER-1000 design.

This is a water-cooled and water-moderated reactor reportedly devised in the late 1970s.

Towards the cooling of the nuclear fuel rods, water is pumped into the primary circuit of the reactor and kept under constant pressure to prevent it from reaching boiling point. And after its use in the reactor complex, the (polluted) water needs to be released, i.e. dumped back onto the environment.

This immediately raises the question as to the consequences of Rooppur for the fisherman in Ishwardi, the sub-district of Pabna where Rooppur is located. Will biodiversity in the reactor's surrounding water bodies be affected -- yes or no?

Further pertinent questions arise once we try to envision how Rooppur's nuclear fuel rods will be supplied and disposed of. To some extent the arrangements chosen imply that Bangladesh's own population will not itself be burdened with the damaging consequences of the nuclear waste that is generated in the nuclear production chain.

Neither will massive amounts of low-level waste be dumped in the country in consequence of uranium mining. Nor will the country's landscape or subsoil be disfigured due to the presence of storage tanks containing long-lasting, high-level fluid waste from nuclear reprocessing.

These consequences will be borne by people elsewhere (!). Yet will these facts suffice to allay the public's fears? Under the agreement signed between Russia and Bangladesh, Bangladesh will not itself enrich uranium. Russia will both supply the fuel elements for the reactors, and will take back the highly radio-active rods once they have completed their 'life-cycle.'

However, this does not mean that the people of Ishwardi and Pabna can rest reassured. Central issues to be looked into here are the *temporary storage* of the radioactive fuel rods after the end of their usage and the *transportation* of the fuel rods to and from the Rooppur nuclear complex.

In Europe the transportation by road, of used fuel elements, has for many years aroused fierce resistance by anti-nuclear activists.

Thirdly, there is the question of reactor safety from a nuclear catastrophe. Russian officials will surely argue that the VVER-1000 design has proven to be more secure than the design of the granite-moderated reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine, where the world's most catastrophic nuclear accident ever took place in 1986.

Surely, it is the previously mentioned RBMK-design which has burdened the Russian state and people with nightmarish problems, -- of hundreds of thousands of cancer deaths, of a vast contaminated region where agricultural production had to be suspended, and of a huge financial burden for the construction and re-building of a reactor-

**Coincidentally the strongest opposition against nuclear construction has been built in the area surrounding Koodankulam, in Tamil Nadu, precisely in opposition against a VVER-reactor supplied by the Russian Federation.**

sarcophage.

Yet the so-called 'stress tests' undertaken in Russia in 2011, subsequent to the Fukushima disaster in Japan, have laid bare numerous basic defects that Russian reactors share with those in Japan.

A joint report brought out by Rosatom and other Russian state institutions in the middle of 2011, for instance, questioned the capability of the country's reactors to remain safe if cooling systems collapse, and there reportedly is no guarantee that power backup systems will be effective in case of a cooling system failure.

The official report also described how spent fuel is simply allowed to accrue on onsite storage sites because of lack of space. One wonders whether scientists belonging to Bangladesh's nuclear establishment have reviewed this report by Russia's state agencies. And whether their own worries have been dispelled.

What then is the best way forward? How can the risks deriving from Rooppur for Bangladesh's population best be assessed? Scientists and economists who are concerned about solving Bangladesh's energy needs will undoubtedly argue that we need a dispassionate debate on the issue, and that it would be wrong to oppose Rooppur merely on the basis of fear.

Being no natural scientist myself and aware of the risks of over-simplification, I would nevertheless argue that the country would do well to take notice of the huge international controversy surrounding nuclear energy today. In neighbouring India, for instance, there has emerged an informed debate, which is of immediate relevance for Bangladesh.

Coincidentally the strongest opposition against nuclear construction has been built in the area surrounding Koodankulam, in Tamil Nadu, precisely in opposition against a VVER-reactor supplied by the Russian Federation.

Being densely populated and subject to annual river flooding, Bangladesh can ill afford to take risks. Hence, whatever construction works in Rooppur, if any, should be preceded by an informed public debate, -- a debate in which both the country's progressive intellectuals, the new generation of urban activists, and Pabna's peasants and fisherman take part.

The writer is author of a theoretical study on nuclear production, *Questioning Globalized Militarism*, and an International Columnist for *The Daily Star*.