

# Social business for promoting rural development

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EFFORTS for promoting rural development as an integral part of overall development in Bangladesh are not new. In fact, comprehensive developmental efforts have been made after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 to improve the condition of the rural masses. A good number of government departments, semi-government and autonomous agencies including NGOs have been active in the field.

Social business is the new focal point for rural development. This is the consensus of around 2000 rural policy officials and experts of the world. For effective rural development, social business can be regarded as a strong functional tool. According to traditional business and entrepreneurship which are meant for profit, people move around development, rather than development moving around people.

The problem and paradoxes with the existing programmes, policies, and initiatives for rural development in Bangladesh are legion. Among them, the most striking problems are: (i) theoretical inconsistency (ii) gap between experts and target groups (iii) lack of motivation for work (iv) mistrust of and no confidence upon local leadership (v) functional gap between development centre and villages (vi) misplaced priorities and needs, and (vii) triangular share of benefits that excludes the rural poor.

I think it is better to put social business at the centre of rural development in the future. It will hopefully bring about all-round development in the rural areas where majority of the people live. While there is no universal agreement on what social business really means from a policy point of view, most will agree that it must include the ideas of beginning a new business, promoting agro-based industries, exploring market opportunities, and then promoting business to fill that niche.

However, promoting social business, which is popularly regarded as the new focus for promoting rural development, will not be easy. It must be admitted at the same time that social business cannot offer a quick fix since business takes time to grow. Professor Yunus, a world renowned pioneer and thinker of social business

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as well as micro-credit regards social business strategy as an effort to build a sustainable entrepreneurial economy through programmes and services that promote successful entrepreneurs.

Social business, which includes, among others, promoting social awareness of entrepreneurship and the value that rural markets can add to the existing goods and services produced in rural areas under the ambient of social business should be regarded as keys to the development efforts. One should keep in mind that entrepreneurs are the building blocks of the new rural economy.

Social business proposes a new approach as part of the entrepreneurial development system aiming at helping the rural poor trying to learn required skill set. Its premise is that all successful entrepreneurs need a core set of skills, yet they start with different skill levels. Social business has unique needs, and the options for addressing those needs are promising. That said, new approaches are needed, as past efforts have generally proven ineffective. The new focus on rural development



prompted by social business is a positive sign as well. Encouraging entrepreneurs by social business strategy does not yield short-run results. Instead, entrepreneurial strategies should be policy constants rather than responses to short-term crises.

The key feature of social business is a greater focus on business networks and clusters rather than individual firms. For instance, the Grameen-Veolia water initiative is an opportunity to apply the principles of social business, pioneered by Prof. Muhammad Yunus, in the arsenic prone rural areas to supply drinking water. Social business holds that markets must be made to work in favour of the poor and provide sustainable solutions rather than exclude them by handouts or subsidies that are always limited in time.

As part of social business the goals of the company are determined and led by social benefits rather than financial returns. According to the precepts of social business, whereby there are "neither losses nor dividends," this investment will be paid for by water charges levied on consumers, which will, in turn,

enable similar projects to be replicated elsewhere. The equipment will be manufactured locally on the basis of the know-how transferred by Veolia Water. Grameen Bank's extensive network will enable charges to be collected by appropriate means.

About ten jobs will be created in each of the villages involved. A road map to the future for promoting effective rural development through improved information system and research, i.e., better data sets on entrepreneurship by region, are needed to establish a crucial link between business innovation and economic performance. In addition, more information and analysis are needed as best practices that sustain entrepreneurial regions. Adopting entrepreneurial strategies in the light of social business rather than only profit maximisation are an integral part of social business. For instance, embedding entrepreneurship education or training can be adopted in the school curricula nationwide. Capacity building and leadership development that many local development officials still do not understand figure prominently as the goals of social business for economic development. More widespread programmes and campaigns are needed to enlighten economic development officials in this regard. While some groups have piloted successful programmes, these innovative programmes are still very few in number. Mobilisation and advocacy efforts will be undertaken to mobilise existing entrepreneurship networks to make sure this happens. Policy and procedural changes are needed to ensure that entrepreneurship is on the front burner in a wide range of government agencies, including NGOs and foreign organisations.

Social business has great power to guide a new generation of rural development policy planning and initiatives. It can unlock the economic potential of rural people and communities. It can also make the best use of scarce local resources to secure sustainable economic development. It can challenge unnecessary constraints on rural development initiatives. And it can identify new opportunities. The challenge now is to figure out how to make social business the centerpiece of rural development policy in Bangladesh.

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## From Malala Yousufzai to Antu Barua

ABDUL MATIN

WE heard about Malala Yousufzai, a school student and activist from Swat in Pakistan, who had been shot in the head in an assassination attempt by Taliban gunmen on October 9, 2012 while she was returning home from school by bus. Her fault was that she was an activist who promoted female education and women's rights. The whole world sympathised with her, and rightly so. She was flown to England for treatment. After recovering from her injury, she is now attending a school in England. The Pakistan government met the expenses of her treatment and provided her father with a job at the Pakistan High Commission so that she can continue with her studies in England.

Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, now UN Special Envoy for Global Education, has initiated a campaign with the slogan "I am Malala" to get all children worldwide in school by 2015. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon talked to Malala and described her as "a symbol of hope, a daughter of the United Nations." Malala has become the youngest nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Actress Angelina Jolie paid tributes to Malala at the Women in the World Summit in New York and donated \$200,000 to 'Malala Fund' to promote girls' education. The Taliban, on the other hand, have vowed to take her life.

Antu Barua, another schoolgirl of the same age, was injured by a crude bomb hurled from a procession led by an extremist group in Chittagong on March 28 during a *hartal* called by them.

Antu was going to attend a coaching class with her mother early in the morning. As soon as they came to the main road from a side lane, they saw some burning tires on the road and a pro-*hartal* procession approaching them. In a state of panic, they rushed towards their destination. They heard two loud bangs. Antu's mother found her daughter lying on the road with her hand covering her right eye. A splinter from the bomb hurt one of her eyes.

Antu was immediately rushed to the Chittagong Medical College Hospital. The doctors at the hospital treated her and assured her that her cornea was not damaged and she would regain her sight. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took responsibility for Antu's treatment. She was brought to the National Institute of Ophthalmology in Dhaka for better treatment. She was also assured that she would be sent abroad for further treatment, if necessary. The prime minister has done what she could do for Antu.

Hoping to recover soon, Antu has only one desire. With tears rolling down her cheeks she said: "I just want to return home and start my study." Antu is now suffering from shock. Occasionally, she wakes up from sleep and starts crying.

According her doctor, Antu may have some serious complications in her eye later even if she recovers her sight. She would, therefore, require regular medical consultations for years if not for the rest of her life. Antu's parents appear to be remarkably tolerant. Instead of asking for punishment of the culprits, they only "expected no such incident would happen to anyone's children in future."

The activists of the extremist groups, in the name of *hartal*, not only hurl grenades and crude bombs endangering the lives of the ordinary people but are also engaged in arson, torching of vehicles, vandalism and sabotage including removal of fishplates from railway tracks. They deserve the highest punishment the law may provide. The law should take its own course even though Antu's parents may not ask for it.

Antu was lucky. The splinter could have damaged her eye permanently. It could have even killed her. Even though the two incidents involving Malala and Antu took place in two different countries at different times, none can overlook the striking similarities between them. The victims are both girls and very young. One was returning from school while the other was going to attend coaching classes. The perpetrators

in both the cases belong to extremist groups with common goals. They are opposed to female education and women's emancipation.

Surprisingly, however, there was hardly any reaction to the incident involving Antu in the western world while there was a huge hullabaloo after the shooting of Malala. No leader of the free world sent any message of sympathy for Antu. No international organisation condemned the perpetrators. Ban Ki-Moon

did not call to console her. What could be the reasons for this indifference?

True, Antu is not an activist like Malala but one's right to education cannot be the prerogative of the activists only. All extremist groups who put any barrier to a child's education are equally guilty and deserve to be condemned, no matter whether the victim is an activist or not. True, the perpetrators in the case of Malala are the common enemies of the western world but should this be a barometer for judging the gravity of a crime? The criminal acts committed against both Malala and Antu are crimes against humanity. Should we not look at them from the same angle? Is there any reason for the international community to be indifferent to Antu under such circumstances?

Lying in the hospital bed, Antu was asking only one question: "Is it my fault that I went to attend my coaching class during *hartal* hours?" I wonder who will provide an answer to her question!

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AKHTAR SHAH

AN ambulance decanted me at my place close to Shahbagh. It was a *hartal* day. Readers, I am not going to remind you of the pain (understatement of the century) that all citizens are enduring. This is being done in the name of exercising democratic rights! Yep folks, this precludes other non-*hartal* participating folks of having any democratic rights. Good, now that the *hartal* principle is clearly established, lets move on.

Jet lag kept me awake, and having driven past Shahbagh my thoughts were whirling round in my head. Why do these two clear groups (among others) need to be bloody minded mutually exclusive? They are completely homogenous in demographic terms.

The religious parties are abandoning any form of indigenous cultural identity or participating in any activities of communities and society at large. Why is it that they have to be such extreme isolationists? Almost all of them are Bengalis, and the first word that came out of their mouth would have been a Bengali one. This has been so for thousands of years. Their hatred for anything culturally Bengali is noticeably unprecedented. In the near past, whilst small sections of the population were always against practice of cultural activities, by and large, there had been a "live and let live" mentality. Both sides carried on with their respective practices and activities peacefully.

This new-found intolerance and violent retaliatory attitude has somewhat threatened the "Moderate Muslim state in SEA" status in the eyes of the world. A new group has sprung up and is making demands on the democratically elected government that are mostly unconstitutional and thus undeliverable. Some have classed their demands as "medieval or even backward."

Weak-willed successive governments have pampered such parties (with let's say dubious intentions) simply for power and/or for cheap populist sentimental appeasement. It's clear that outside forces are at play, financing and egging these parties on in the name of a sacred religion. None of the details of such allegations (nature of) of denigration of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) or the religion thus far have been made public with names of the perpetrators and

irrefutable evidence. This, without a shadow of doubt, does not represent the true feelings of the largely peaceful religious majority who would like to get on with their lives and live peacefully with others.

The opposite side (Shahbagh youth) have made some attempts to let the general public know that they were not against any religion, but have not included some religious activities (of any religion) in their proceeding. Even if they were token ones, they could have included appropriate interpretations from various holy books and scriptures sympathetic to their cause. Their message so far has been clear and unequivocal regarding war crimes/verdicts and the parties who are alleged to have been exploitative of the religious sentiments of ordinary citizens.

Whilst the non-violent nature of their protestations has been welcomed by people both at home and abroad, they lacked a clear and cohesive plan to include all sections of the population in their programme, especially the most vulnerable, emotionally and religiously gullible people. They are a sizeable majority

and continuous successful propaganda by vested parties has meant that they have enjoyed their active and moral support. Photoshopping a face on the moon is a good example of their handiwork.

This "oil and water" nature of the confrontation means that a large chunk of suburban population go to a *mela*, watch *jatra* and at the same time pray regularly and attend religious meetings and functions. They do so as a matter of course, and that has not generated any conflict in their minds.

Could the sensible and thoughtful people in these two groups not shake up these two ingredients (oil and water) and come up with a mix that would stay long enough together for the sake of the country and its people? Even when separate there would still be tiny "molecules" of both to create a sustainable understanding with mutual respect for each others' feeling and sentiments. I feel a tad sleepy, am I being Pollyannaish?

Then only democracy will have some meaning for the citizens who will be free to practice their own religious and cultural activities without fear and persecution.

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