

For an equitable, just society



DR RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

The persistence of poverty warrants an inbuilt process of questioning and challenging the effectiveness of interventions, given the disturbing trend of deceleration in rate of reduction of poverty in the country. According to the statistics of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the reduction in poverty has slowed down to 5.9 percentage points during the period of 2010-2014 from 8.5 percentage points of the years 2005-2010, and from 8.9 percentage points of the period 2000-2005. The percentage of people living below the poverty line has declined from 48.9 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2005 to 31.5 percent in 2010 (according to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey data). The government approximates that 25.6 percent of the population lives below the so-called poverty line as of 2014.

There has been much cacophony about economic growth, yet the process in Bangladesh has not matched with jobs. Evidently, a considerable number of people have entered into the labour market with wages below the requirement for graduating out of the so-called poverty line — people who can be termed as "working poor." According to the BBS' latest labour force survey for the calendar years of 2014 and 2015, the country generated only 600,000 employments (300,000 per annum) out of two million eligible to enter the job market on an annual basis. Youth unemployment rate also rose sharply to 9.5 percent in 2015 from 8.1 percent in 2013. The unemployment rate is high amongst educated youth. The number of underemployed increased by over 10 million between 2011 and 2013 and reached 21.5 million in 2014. A World Bank-ILO report states that about 41 percent of Bangladeshi youth were NEET (not in employment, education or training) in 2013.

There is widespread concern that the fruits of economic growth have not been shared fairly, and that the current economic crisis has further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. According to BBS estimates, nominal wage indices have increased by 24.7 percent during the period 2010-11 to 2014-15 while the consumer price index (CPI) grew by 32.6 percent during the same period, implying labourers have lost 7.9 percent of the real wage income they used to earn in 2010-11. The degree of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, has increased from an average of 0.38 in the 1980s to 0.44 in the 1990s and further to 0.46 in the 2000s, meaning the gap between the rich and the poor is still widening.

It is also difficult to find causation between deliberate policy of government and reduction in poverty. Economic growth in Bangladesh is mostly consumption-based which can also otherwise be called "auto-pilot rate of growth". The underemployed people in rural areas, who either migrated to cities or abroad and fuelled consumption through remittances, largely contributed to Bangladesh's reduction in poverty.

The lack of institutions has worsened inequality. Bangladesh is being run, like other post-colonial countries, by intermediate classes which are interested only in securing wealth by any means. This urge for securing money, by any and all means, results in the alienation between incumbents in power and people at large, and in excessive dependence on the coercive power of the state. This form of alienation is fortified by the denial of citizen's freedoms, civil liberties, human rights and socioeconomic justice. Over the years, through the actions of successive regimes, the aspirations of the war of liberation — equality, human dignity and social justice — have been supplanted by a completely different kind of aspiration for the power elite - primitive capital accumulation. This also brings home an absence and crisis in formation of the elite or bourgeoisie.

In the institutional sense, the major reasons for persistence of poverty are: absence of state for the expansion of productive capacities, deficiency of equality-augmenting



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employment system, shortfalls in public expenditure for enhancement of capabilities, inadequacies in regulatory regimes, lack of complementary policy structure, and non-existence of enforceability of constitutional rights.

The problem of continued poverty arises in failing to conceptualise that poverty is the manifestation of social property relations. The rate of decline in poverty is accelerated or decelerated depending on the social property relations rather than the so-called articulation that an increase in the size of the "things-basket" reduces poverty. This happens as this "things-basket" operates under particular social relationships. The "things-basket" may reduce poverty up to a point, but it is reproduced due to social property relations, embedded through institutions, structures, power, and the state.

Although the signs, symptoms and conspicuousness of poverty are widespread in the real world, and there are vast literatures on poverty, the scientific foundation on the causes of poverty is still weak. Popular perceptions of the poor — how they behave and why they are poor — and excessive importance on measurement, may be part of reasons as to why scientific approach(es) to poverty has/have not received deserving attention. Poverty assessments, thus, are typically clouded in conceptual and methodological shortcomings.

For poverty measurement, governments employ the head count, or the proportion of the population under poverty, based upon the World Bank's methodology of "things-basket". Poverty lines may be set in a way such that with a change of only a few cents a large number could be "lifted out of poverty", without any substantive change in their position. The Bank only focuses on extreme poverty, or "absolute deprivation" rather than the relative poverty. Reduction in income poverty has a limit, and the domain of poverty thus becomes volatile. For example, one may generate income at an increased rate but s/he ought to remain at the same level in society due to social stratification and people belonging to the lower class of the society not being allowed to enjoy other elements of life. The Bank also assumes *a priori* that there is no poverty in high-income countries; alternative research shows the assumptions are not tenable. There are contestations over the appropriateness of consumption or income as the proxy measures since consumption tend to be higher in the beginning and later periods of life and income tends to be higher in the middle period of life.

Alternative poverty measures such as the capability approach have broadened the concept of poverty, suggesting

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it as a manifestation of inadequate human wellbeing. This approach, in theory, is better than monetary approaches, yet the rate of decline in poverty depends upon the social property relations as poverty is interlinked to, and emanates from, the functioning of society. Since the reduction in poverty is a dynamic process, structure, history, interventions and institutions, to name a few, underpin it.

Bangladesh is uniquely positioned not only to eliminate poverty from her soil, but also to offer a paradigm to the world at large as she conceptualises her strategy for development by translating the glorious spirit of hundred years of struggles for becoming a citizens' state that ensures "equality, human dignity and social justice", as articulated in the Proclamation of Independence.

First, the new framework would provide a better link between the poor as rights-holders and powerful players like the state as duty-bearers. Poverty reduction requires not only a proactive stance from the part of the poor, but also actions from the individuals and entities whose trails are intentionally or unintentionally responsible for creating such outcomes.

Second, the zero-poverty framework recognises that poverty is often the result of unequal treatment and opportunities in the economic, political and social arenas. For example, inequality not only compromises a society's ability to sustain growth and transfer the

growth into poverty reduction, it also exacerbates unsustainability, including environmental degradation, which in turn aggravates poverty.

Third, the framework identifies exclusion, discrimination and exploitation as the root causes of poverty and introduces important indicators for measurement of an effective justice system. Without access to justice, the marginalised would continue to feel helpless and social harmony would break down.

Fourth, the framework builds on the principles of sustainable development in a way that acknowledges a broader level of necessities. Thus, unlike other frameworks, it works both at the collective and individual levels to address the harmful effects and reduce the suffering of the poor.

Fifth, the framework offers a new form of partnership between developed and developing countries that is built on the basis of historic responsibility and, is therefore better suited for development initiatives.

The concept of rights is based on the normative idea that being born as a human being, every person is entitled to enjoy certain entitlements that are required to lead a life with dignity and respect. In addition, rights are universal, inalienable, and indivisible. Some broad consensus has emerged over the years, and rights indicators are increasingly used to measure the standard of life as well as the compliance and obligation.

Equality normally represents that everyone gets the same. It, however, disregards the fact that every human being has different needs. For example, the calorie requirement of a child is different from that of an adult. Therefore, equality should be used to mean the same level of opportunity. Equality can be categorised in many ways. The division of equality, into the following four types — between countries, within countries, within household and between generations — is however essential for poverty reduction and human development. Each of these four dimensions can be further divided between equality of outcome (i.e. whether the benefits are shared equally) and equality of process (i.e. whether the treatment is equal).

The meaning and measurement of justice varies across disciplines and contexts. At the core, the function of justice is to differentiate right from wrong and establish the right in every possible way. In the development arena, it is important that justice supports a proper incentive system and solves conflicts in the best way. First, distributive or economic justice is needed for measuring the fairness in distribution, both in access to resources and distribution of benefits. Procedural justice is required to ensure

everybody's claim is decided according to a fair process, irrespective of gender, race, colour, ethnicity, wealth, social status, etc. Finally, the indicators of restorative and retributive justice would provide the safeguard that not only the violators are identified following a fair process, but also that they are punished accordingly and the harm is repaired. For each type of indicator, it is also important to record what the duty-bearers (especially states) are doing and what the outcomes of their efforts are.

The concept of sustainability often includes a combined approach consisting of three different views: economic, social and environmental. Natural resources provide materials for production and consumption. Environment also affects the survival of communities in a particular region. Conversely, economic activities and social practices also determine the rate and pace of environmental degradation. To keep it at a central position, therefore, the focus should strictly be on environmental variables and on those human activities (whether economic and social) that have direct influence on environment. Exploitation of natural resources, climate and atmosphere, and sustainable production and consumption thus become important elements of sustainability.

In today's globalised world, each state's action often produces a positive or negative result for the others. So the concept of global partnership has received prominence in international development agenda. Moreover, the high-income countries are to take active role in the financing of development programmes in poor countries.

Financing is an important area of international cooperation for poverty reduction, but unless improvements are done in other areas, such as market access, trade, and technology transfer, the effectiveness of financing would remain questionable. Likewise, any international cooperation between developed and developing countries would not be able to create much impact if measures are not introduced to ensure collaboration between private sector of the high-income countries with poor countries and their private sectors.

Thus, a process of creative thinking and energy is required for the development of new sets of strategies, combining policies and implementation mechanisms, to address the emerging challenges.

The writer is Professor of Economics at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Dhaka, and chairperson of Bangladeshi independent multidisciplinary think tank, the Umnayan Onneshan.