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Needed: A National Policy For Children

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DO we need a national policy for children? This has become a pertinent question as the conditions of our children have not improved markedly since the independence of the country. Children, rhetorically, are the future of a nation and parents quite often discuss their children when they meet each other.

The States and Governments are run by people who are either parents or grand-parents. Nevertheless, the status of the children is depressing in most of the underdeveloped countries. And Bangladesh is no exception.

Statistically, taking both the sexes, about 44 per cent of our population are children with an age-limit of 14. Most of them are undernourished, uncared for, having no social and political protection. Of all the children born in Bangladesh, about half are below the weight considered high risk in developed countries. About 500,000 of the new born do not survive their first year and another 300,000 die before the age of five. About 3.2 million children who reach the age of five face regular bouts of diarrhoea, infections and malnutrition. The infant mortality rate is

among the highest in the world with government estimate of 125 per thousand live births.

Figures about the desperate situation of the children can fill in pages. We do not need to go for too much of statistics where our environment is the best indicator of their situation. Apart from their distressed situation because of poverty, malnutrition, various health hazards and poor access to education, we have children who are orphaned and abandoned, physically handicapped, toiling and floating called Tokai or Pathakali.

There are initiatives from Government and non-Government agencies to alleviate the conditions of the children. But the situation has not changed significantly.

World Children's Day is observed globally every year since it was first initiated in 1953. The United Nations Charter on the rights of the children was adopted on 20 November 1959. The Charter clearly states the rights of the children to survive and grow up as normal human beings. But the majority of children in Bangladesh are deprived of their rights though the country is a signatory to the Charter.

Whatever may be the national resource base, there can be no excuse for ignoring the case of the children. By all arguments they deserve special treatment by the nation as a whole. There should be resources available to make better prospects for the nation. But investment in human resource development by a country is a political decision. The social managers will have to decide how do they expect their nation to move into future. Whatever is the level of commitment of our social managers it seems that a policy to safeguard the interests and well-being of the children does not get the proper attention. Though the government is committed to adopt a national policy for children, nothing has been announced till now.

As a nation we are old enough to have a national policy for children. Considering the state of our children, a national policy should incorporate the following:

1. Compulsory and free primary education for all children.
2. Non-conventional education system for children unable to attend normal schools.

3. Special assistance programme for under-privileged children.

4. Guarantee of the rights of a mother to keep the child in case of a divorce with maintenance allowance from the father.

5. Rehabilitation programme for all types of handicapped children.

6. Prohibition of any cruelty to children.

7. Prohibition of employing any child below the age of 15 for any type of work.

8. Protection of children as a special category during natural disasters and food shortage.

9. Provisions for improved mother care facilities in development programmes.

10. Safe environment for children.

If it comes to the point of formulating a national policy, there may be more issues to be incorporated. These are some of the suggestions. These suggestions can be debated if we do not have an attitudinal change. Society as a whole will have to commit itself to the welfare of the children, otherwise the dream of development will never be reality.