

Men And Matters

Education For Development

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THE ultimate goal of development is to reduce poverty and improve the standards of living. Poverty has been defined in a number of ways. But I think, perhaps the most eloquent definition is that of Robert McNamara, the former President of the World Bank, who described absolute poverty as, "a condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, squalid surroundings, disease, high rate of infant mortality and low life expectancy, as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency". The World Bank has recently used two poverty lines to estimate the number of poor people in developing countries as under:

Those whose annual consumption is less than 370 US dollars per person, per year, are considered poor. And those whose annual consumption is less than 275 US dollar per person, per year are considered extremely poor. The use of upper poverty line of 370 US dollars gives an estimate of 1,116 million people, in the developing countries, are living in poverty. Of these, 630 million people, were classified as extremely poor. Bangladesh comes in this category. And according to UNDP estimates, the number of poor people in developing countries is expected to rise further to 1.3 billion, by the turn of century — and likely to hit 1.5 billion mark, by the year 2050.

However, the overall success in the task of ending poverty, illiteracy and inequality of opportunities has been quite limited in our country, as well as in India and Pakistan. The development, particularly in agriculture and industries over the years, has been substantially and systematically outclassed by many other developing countries. This is because they have pursued diverse economic policies. South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and China, may be cited as the best examples. These countries have all been able to achieve a radical reduction in human deprivation while improving social security. It has been found that despite substantial differences in economic policy these countries have had much in common in terms of socio-economic policies, particularly, relating to expansion of basic education and health-care

system.

Regrettably, there is one field in which Bangladesh has clearly done worse than even the average poorest countries in the world, and that sector is elementary education. The rate of adult literacy in Bangladesh is simply deplorable. Even countries like Philippines, Zambia and China, which were no better than Bangladesh a few decades ago have left us far behind in the field of basic education. Needless to emphasize that literacy is an important social achievement. It plays a crucial role in facilitating success, in other fields of human endeavour. Adult literacy in the People's Republic of China with over a billion people, is 80 per cent. And social opportunities are, in fact influenced by a variety of factors. These include the state of education and health-care. Economic development therefore, should be seen in terms of expansion of opportunities that every individual in society enjoys.

The effectiveness of the opening up of the new economic opportunities and of expanding the possibilities of good use of labour and skill may depend greatly on basic education and training facilities and infrastructural availability of energy, power, clean water, sewerage and rapid communication link. The UN body of Economy and Social Council (ECOSOC) at its 1997 substantive session in Geneva, which concluded on July 25, endorsed "micro-credit" to generate self-employment and contribute to empowerment specially of women-folk. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed micro-credit as an important element in the global quest for new resources for poverty eradication. He recommended that the micro-credit leaders, financial sector specialists and key government regulators should create the necessary facilitating framework for linking micro-credit to capital markets.

Mention may be made here, that Pakistan in its efforts to achieve radical changes in the macro-economic structural reforms, is contemplating to reduce the corporate tax-rates as well as personal income tax rates to tangible minimum levels.

Pakistan government, has put its priority to revitalize its economy specially in the industrial sector, to maximise exportable surpluses, to carve out a firm place in the international competitive economy, to promote the stabilisation process. Prime Minister Sharif's government has decided to practice an "economic growth oriented approach", rather than "revenue generation" approach. Fiscal reforms have been already made to support production and export-oriented economy.

But with all these, what is most important for development is providing opportunities to the people to improve the quality of their lives. Various economic arrangements are of central importance to the presence or absence of social opportunities. But the opportunities offered by a well-functioning market may be difficult to use when a person is handicapped by illiteracy or ill-health. Then again a person with some background of education and good health may be unable to take initiative to financial restraints and economic opportunities related to lack of proper jobs. The comparative advantages are dependent on the rise in the ratios of skilled labourers.

Development is a process of self-reliant growth, achieved through the participation of the people, acting in their own interests, as they see them and remains under their own control. It's first objective is poverty alleviation, providing productive employment, and satisfying the basic need of all people. As also sharing fairly, all surpluses accrued. This implies that basic goods and services, such as food and shelter, basic education and health-care facilities and safe water supply, must be accessible to all and sundry. However, high-sounding platitudes, cosmetic plans without being backed by practical action, cannot bring about the desired result. This can be only rewarded by rigid planning, service before self leadership, dedicated determination and political will, otherwise this huge human potential of Bangladesh, generally deprived of this basic needs will further sink into the mire of degradation.

And emotional, as the Begalees are, we all felt outraged by the US Secretary of state, Dr. Henry Kissinger's derogatory comment calling our country "a bottomless basket case", but the fact remains that even after the silver jubilee celebration of our independence, there is hardly much significant development visible, to be proud of. There is a very disquieting scenario on the economic front. Educated unemployment problem is simply horrifying. Exports are dwindling European Community has already sent alarm signals that they have clamped temporary ban on shrimp and other fish export from Bangladesh. Also the investment climate has become unfavourable due to continuous political unrest and political instability.

And to cap all, the overall reserves in foreign exchange, after reaching the level of 3.4 billion US dollars in April 1995 from minimal level of 300 million US dollars in 1991, went down to 2.07 billion in May 1996. This means that the level of overall foreign exchange has gone downhill, while the public expenditures have remained the same as before, or even may have increased further. This poses a great challenging task for the government to tackle with.

There is one redeeming feature. Many non-government organisations are working in our rural areas for helping the poor, who are rootless assetless and overwhelmingly illiterate. But the real impact of poverty alleviation programmes as a whole implemented by thousands of NGOs, working for the last two decades or so, remains elusive. No substantive monitoring of the activities of the national or international NGOs, have so far been undertaken. Reported allegations of overspending on overhead costs including high monthly salaries and expensive allowances, luxurious offices and residential quarters in posh areas of Dhanmondi and Gulshan, often baffle dispassionate observers. In this context what is working in public mind is that the bulk of the foreign-aided money is spent in overhead costs and only a meagre amount trickles down for the benefit of the poor, who deserve much more.