

Community level statistics and local level planning-I

—Md. Munirul Huq

There could perhaps be no two opinions about the view that the ultimate objective of any development planning is the welfare and elevation of the level of living of the people. Ever since planning has been taken up by different nations as a means towards improvement of their economic conditions, the goals and objectives of plans and their strategies or designs experienced several changes and manifestations overtime. Upon attaining independence from colonial rule, a large number of developing countries have been attempting to transform their rural areas where an overwhelming majority of the people live. However, the capitalistic approach of growth-oriented planning in most cases did not take distributive aspects of development into consideration in the proper perspective and as a result the 'spread-effect' or the so called, 'trickle-down' benefits of development did not reach the vast multitude of people, particularly living in the rural areas. Even with the gradual shift of emphasis on increased income and reduction of poverty, advocacy of social and economic justice to all those participating in the production and services, most of the programmes could not be integrated with the total process of planning and development to render the benefits self-sustaining.

PLANNING EXPERIENCES IN BANGLADESH IN RETROSPECT:

In spite of the fact that Bangladesh has been experiencing somewhat increasing urbanization over the recent years, it is still, by and large, a rural country where nearly 85 percent of the people live in the villages. It is therefore, quite logical to deduct that attention of the country's development endeavours should be the villages and the rural poor. In practice although there has been increasing focus on rural development in the plans ever since independence in 1971, until very recently, development planning activities in Bangladesh were being mostly undertaken at the national level and the main machinery for formulation and implementation of development programmes and projects had been the public agencies and the private sector closely regulated by the administrative ministries. The development process initiated by the national plans had, to a considerable extent, bypassed the local rural community and the villages and participation of local population in reflecting their development needs in the national plans had been minimal. Some grafted programme of supplemental character such as the Rural Works Programmes, Food for Works Programmes, activities of the NGOs (both national and international) and the like did address to the problems of the rural areas and the people to some extent. However, due to inadequate coverage, limited resources and more importantly, owing to the absence of a well-organized administratively and technically efficient and democratically elected viable local government capable of reflecting the aspirations of local people in the national plans, such efforts could achieve only limited results towards mitigating the vast problems of rural poverty and pervasive unemployment situation. In brief, the institutional weakness and a relatively centralized nature of development administration were the major bottlenecks in the way of rural development in the past. If the planning experiences of the country (as of many other developing countries) are summarised it is revealed that the impact of the national development plans in general and that of rural development programmes and projects in particular had rather insignificant impact on amelioration of rural poverty where participation of the people at the local level in the planning process has not taken place in a meaningful form and perspective. The economy could not generate sufficient employment to absorb the rapidly increasing labour force particularly in the rural areas, income gaps between rural and urban and within the rural community have further widened and the rural poor did not have equitable access to improved physical facilities, resources and public services although productivity oriented and infrastructural development programmes perceptibly good progress has been made.

NEED FOR LOCAL LEVEL PLANNING IN BANGLADESH

From the foregoing it apparently appears that for a country like Bangladesh where poverty and unemployment is pervasive in the rural areas, with the rural sector suffering from serious underdevelopment in production, infrastructure health, nutrition etc., planning and implementation of development activities at local is essential in order to bring about the much needed socio-economic emancipation of the rural poor hitherto toiling under the conventional development planning approaches and controls.

The sphere of responsibilities would be formulation and integration of realistic development plans of the local area, setting targets and priori-

ties and preparation of programmes and projects to satisfy the needs of the people and provision of clear guidelines for an effective coordination of project implementation activities. While institutions are needed to take responsibility of such local level planning, the institutions need the necessary manpower and technical capability to discharge their functions. Indeed, one of the major constraints in local level planning centres on the issue of manpower and technical capability at the local level. A number of developing countries experienced such problems and Bangladesh is perhaps no exception.

P.T.O.