Youth Involvement

Framework For Mass Literacy And Poverty Alleviation Projects

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POVERTY and illiteracy are two of the greatest problems the nation is committed to combat by the year 2000. In order to materialise the commitment, government allocated maximum of its scarce resources under current year's budget in the various sectors and sub-sectors related to poverty alleviation, human resource development and education (specially in primary education).

Previously, in spite of the intensity of the problem, political commitment to poverty-focused programmes were not adequate. As a result, issues like hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy etc. remained neglected in reality, in spite of rhetorical overtone of various populist programmes.

By now a marked qualitative change in the total socio-political environment of the country has taken place, and those changes are not confined within the territory of Bangladesh only, it embraces the seven other countries of the region as well.

In the recently concluded Dhaka conference of SAARC, all the heads of government of the seven SAARC countries signed a joint declaration for alleviating poverty from the region by the year 2000. This may be taken as a big landmark in the history of political commitment in favour of poverty alleviation programme in this part of the world. Now, what is needed is a greater participation of society in this field for its smooth implementation.

Side by side with the government efforts, many non-government development agencies are also engaging themselves in these activities, BRAC, Proshika, Grameen Bank, CDC (Ctg), Bangladesh 2000 etc. are some of them.

We are only six years away from the year 2000. As the social and political commitment is already achieved, what is needed most now, is a pragmatic plan and vigorous action for implementing it.

Poverty and Literacy redefined :
As a matter of fact, the terms 'poverty alleviation' and 'eradication of illiteracy' are very commonly used in many project documents. For conceptual clarity and to make the action programmes more realistic the concepts need to be redefined in specific country and project contexts. Poverty and illiteracy are not essentially two separate problems that need to be addressed in two different ways. They are merely the manifestations of one and single problem with two different dimensions.

It is also true that there is no short-cut solution to poverty. It needs concerted and continued painstaking measures to adopt. We are a resource-poor nation, prone to natural disasters like flood, cyclone, erosion etc. and population has already grown too large, if the population — production and distribution ratio — considered. Even then, if we seriously believe in what we publicly say in seminars, conferences, meetings and project documents, still we stand a chance.

Paucity of resources itself does not

make an individual or a nation poor; loss of human dignity and self-esteem makes a materially rich person or nation even poorer. Poverty alleviation does not simply mean improvement of the material condition of lives and livings. Raising human dignity is very basic in the whole process of poverty alleviation. If self-esteem and sense of dignity can be raised, fifty per cent of the poverty situation automatically vanishes.

Education is one of the best means to raise that consciousness of human dignity which attributes meaning to one's life and destiny. Sometimes, particular populist approach to mass literacy creates, confusion about its focus and achievement. Literacy and literacy alone can not directly help the process of the alleviation of poverty. If literacy means only teaching of 'alphabets and numbers' then the prospect of the project is very limited. Literacy in this case may be one of the components of a proper mass education package which is composed of formal, non-formal and informal methods of life-centered functional education. They need education which not only enables, the participants to read and write but also opens their inward looking eyesight, forward looking vision and finally enhances their consciousness so that they can understand the meaning of life and living. That comprehensive mass education package can effectively help the process of poverty alleviation.

The problems like poverty and lack of education can be solved effectively if the human resources of the country can be mobilized and harnessed properly. Bangladesh is considered to be a reservoir of untapped human resources, and they are certainly the young generation of the country.

When we say "Youth" we certainly mean the population belong to a certain age group which is generally agreed to be between 15-30 years. In Bangladesh, almost 30% of the population belongs to that particular age group and further to this, 70% of the country's population comprises people between 0-35 years of age. As bulk of the nation's population is relatively young, special focus of development planning should be placed on them. Exclusion of youth from the main perspective of development policy in this case may become counter-productive.

In the past, the youth played pioneering roles, in all the major socio-political developments of the country. From the historic Language Movement of 1950s to the latest Anti-autocratic and pro-democracy Movement of the 1990s, youths were always in the forefront. Given the proper leadership, scope, direction and guidance, youths can every effectively be utilized to free our society from the curse of illiteracy and poverty in a minimum period of time as well as with minimum material cost.

Involvement of Youth : Involving youth in the development process of the country is not a single — handed

task of a particular ministry, division, directorate or voluntary agency, for which the whole society needs some sort of reorientation. In short, to pave the way towards reorientation the following four questions may be asked to the project manages who intend to involve the youths in implementing their programmes. In the process of answering the questions the expected reorientation may take place.

Question No. 1. Why the involvement of Youth is so important in a particular project ? Probable answers. Because of the size of the youth population in society; Because of the cost factor; Because of the fact that demand is raised from the youth; Because they are the group of people who can be utilized easily.

Question No. 2. Who are the Youths to be involved? Probable answers: All Youths of the country; Selected few/on selected criteria; Urban Youths only; Rural Youths only; Poor rural Youths with no or little education; Rural Youths with no education; They are all male Youths; All female Youths; Male and Female mixed.

Question No. 3. How the Youths are going to be dealt with? Probable answers: As an object of the project; As subject of the project; As a means to achieve certain end; As catalyst, change agent or Animator; As surrogate client of an elite patron; As an autonomous and self conscious activist.

Question No. 4. In what specific project component or content involvement of Youth is sought? Probable answers: To man the project as project personnel; To become direct beneficiary by paticipating in one particular vocation; To act as link personnel between the project; Personnel and the beneficiary.

There exists a firm normative tructure in general social attitude towards the youth which is further determined by authority and power of the beholders. Authority and power in a normal situation belongs to the older generation, as a result of hich a set of beliefs and norms are nposed on the youth which they lay or may not like. As they are olitically and economically not always in a position to protest they somehow digest them with frustation which ultimately does not deliver expected results.

Sometimes due to justified or unjustified reasons younger people feel that everywhere in society they are encircled by a hostile, powerful, rich and unsympathetic adult generation, who do not care to understand their problems and feelings, instead misinterpret their problems.

Youths may not like the idea that their well-being will always be thought of by their elders without consulting them.

If the above situation prevails in any society, then development policy planners should try to understand the youth mind of a particular time first, then steps should be taken to bridge the generation gap by accommodating the views of both.

Mass Literacy Project : The project should clearly define the role of Youth in planning, implementation and benefit sharing process to clearly show whether youths are object or subject, means or end of the project.

The basic programme on "Mass Literacy" needs more elaboration in describing the objectives and strategies. Is it a package programme which incorporates education, income generation, institution building etc. or simply teaching of alphabets and numbers? In this connection existing NGO experiences (of BRAC, Ganashesta, CDC (Ctg)) may be reviewed.

Income generation, institutionalization and literacy should go hand in hand. One should not get priority over the other. Because, before addressing the basic issue of the means of living, the literacy programme may not create enough enthusiasm. To us urban people literacy comes as the first, priority; but in their priority it may not be so.

In the name of involving the Youth, the project should not bypass the community. The selection of youths in various project locations should be left entirely with the community. Because, for long-term sustainance of the project community involvement is equally important. If by any mistake the project isolates the youth from the community, the project may not succeed.

Selection of youth as teachers or as learner-beneficiaries should not be gender blind, rather the programme should become more gender specific and gender focused. The project should focus more pin pointedly on the vast majority of relatively younger rural women. Because they are the real people who are deprived of education. If it is not understand properly, there is every possibiity that the project may be taken over by the male segment of the youth population.

Before launching the project, every project area should be surveyed to assess the needs of the area. The original project document should include a survey schedule.

The project document should also include a comprehensive training and income support plan keeping productive potential of the particular locality in view of the survey conducted.

The project document should clearly spell out the grass root level institutional or organisational aspect of the project including sustainability. Only one 'Youth Teacher' or contact person is not enough. The project can think of involving existing rural institutions such as Mosques, Maktabs, clubs, cooperatives, other NGO groups, Union Parishads with the programme. There should be some mechanism to establish links with the general community and existing rural institutions, if the sustainability side of the programme is taken into consideration.

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