

RESEARCH NOTE

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POVERTY ALLEVIATION & MACRO-MICRO LINKAGES: CRITICAL ISSUES

If one goes by the commitment of the SAARC Summit in Dhaka in 1993, poverty should have been eradicated from all the countries of South Asia *this year*!¹ But painful as it may sound, not only have the respective countries failed in the task, there is also more importantly no one to accept the responsibility for making such an outlandish, if not under the circumstances impossible, commitment. It almost suggested that there was no link between the policymakers of poverty eradication and those requiring policing² out of poverty, that is, the impoverished lot. Such a linkage has always been problematic, indeed, for reasons that are rooted in history, politics, socio-economics (or, as it is more recently christened, culturnomics), psycho-geography, including the sociology of knowledge. The issue of macro-micro linkages, insofar it is a link between the state economic policies and those who require economic benefits and upliftment, also ought to be viewed within the fold of the said problematic. A brief but closer exposition will make this clear.

A macro-micro linkage presupposes independent or at least distinctive existence of both macro and micro. Otherwise, why

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contemplate or plan or police a "linkage" between the two? Three issues may be raised in this context. Firstly, the linkage has always been *linear*, with the macro determining the micro. Yunusonomics and the like³ are somewhat of an exception, almost standing out as alternative quests for reorienting the linkage, but these are also not free from the linearity suggested above.

Secondly, and it is somewhat of a variation of the first, the macro is always present *within* the micro as an overpowered, overdeveloped structure, with little space for the micro to organise itself freely on its own and therefore, must remain influenced and mostly distorted by the power of the macro. The pervasiveness of the power of *Sarkar*,⁴ politically as well as culturally, can hardly be denied. It is, in fact, revered and feared, albeit in different degrees, both nationally and locally, at times with contexts related more to culture than politics or even management or administration.

Thirdly, the micro, both as psycho-geographical and politico-economic categories,⁵ remains *within the minds and practices* of those planning and managing the macro. Ministers and policymakers in charge of transport and communication have literally bent roads and highways, at times to a considerable degree and that again without any macro economic justification, mainly for making them pass through their hometown or village for boosting their ego and political and social constituencies. The pervasiveness of micro-politics (indeed, of the corrupt and distorted variant⁶) at the highest level of the country is something that cannot be wished away very easily.

The above sets of issues, of course, are a part of a more entrenched and long-term process, something about which we are becoming familiar only now following major (possibly paradigmatic) shifts in our methodological pursuits.⁷ I have no intention to get into

a discussion on methodology, but will reflect on one or two things underscoring the change of perspective, needless to say those having a direct bearing on the macro-micro linkages. Let me first take up the issue of governing poverty.

Governing poverty in this part of the region is a late twentieth-century phenomenon, resulting mainly from a process of delinking and linking of the privileged with the poor. In Europe itself only with the economic crises of eighteenth-century do we find the “eroding of the efficiency of traditional policies of assistance”, the latter based mainly on “charity and on the incarceration of the poor together with the mad and the sick.”⁸ In fact, for the first time, illness and poverty began to be distinguished, with the mad and the sick having being isolated and placed within the walls of the *hôpital général* (houses that Louis IV had built a century earlier for the poor and the mendicants), while the latter, that is, the poor, ending up as free labour in the burgeoning capitalist market. Not all of this transformation proved beneficial to the poor; indeed, two centuries later this resulted in making poverty and the poor a part of governance and state policies.

In this context, the South Asian experience was different more in form than in substance. A combination of both charity and incarceration made the poor a part of the lowest caste, with little or no state-run facilities for the mad and the sick. Colonial modernity brought the hospital (the Calcutta Medical College being established only in 1835)⁹ to house mainly the privileged sick as well as a politics to free the poor from the caste-based incarceration and making them a part of the free labour. Post-Gandhian and more importantly post-independence politics brought fresh interests to the issue of poverty and the poor, but the latter actually became a serious governing issue when quick replication of the West (capitalist as well as the so-called socialist models) did not materialise.

Governing poverty also became a disciplinary quest, with economics and political economy becoming hegemonic and framing the task of policing the state and the poor people out of poverty. This had serious implications insofar as the macro-micro linkage for poverty alleviation/reduction/eradication was concerned. This is because by narrowing down the issue of linkage to the field of economics or political economy, not only did the macro fail to link itself with the micro and vice versa, it also created a milieu where the reality of both macro and micro remained ill-exposed or even under-explored for initiating and materialising diverse and dispersed linkages. Critics refer to disciplinary shortcomings and there are good reasons for this. Let me explain.

Oxford University Press (Delhi) in the back cover of Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) introduced the author (I believe, quite inadvertently but not necessarily senselessly) by stating, "He is the winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize for *Economic Science*" (emphasis mine). This is indeed ironic when Sen himself is in the record of critiquing the transformation of economics into an *engineering approach* or "science" devoid of ethics.¹⁰ I guess this was bound to come about from the moment economics began to distinguish itself from social science and conform to its own (albeit wilfully and narrowly constructed) disciplinary boundaries. There was much hope that the discipline of political economy would salvage the grounds lost by the engineering approach to economics. But that too did not come about, although for totally different reasons.

I have always considered the practitioner of political economy, that is, a political economist – *part-time* economist, *part-time* politician. This has become more critical and pervasive and at times also perverse in the light of the *rupture* between ethics and economics that Sen refers to, which again with the coinage of

“economic science” signified a rupture between social science and economics. Put differently, political economy has been less organically linked and holistically organised than is commonly presumed, and the conflict between politics and economics continues to rage on with little or no effort to creatively combine the two. Within and beyond South Asia this has come about in an interesting way, indeed, with the economists blaming politics and the politicians and the politicians blaming economics and the economists for all the wrongs and slumps in local, national and global economies.

Columnist-economist Robert J. Samuelson, for instance, while contributing to the “economics” page of the *Newsweek*, very recently wrote: “the origins of (the global) slumps lie not in economics but very much in local traditions, values and politics.” He then, following his coinage of the term “culturnomics,” went on to say,

Economic markets everywhere conform to the peculiarities of local history, social structure, psychology, religion and politics. These forces influence the desire to work, consume, invest, save and take risks. Human nature may be constant, but it is always chiselled by culture.. [It] is an illusion to think that economic weakness stems only from economic causes and can be cured quickly by economic remedies.¹¹

More at home, economist Rehman Sobhan, in a recent public lecture, stressed the need for “political structural adjustment” for the economic development of Bangladesh.¹²

The reverse trend - politicians blaming economics and even the economists - is well known. How on earth would they be able to justify their claim to power while failing to deliver time and again, almost on a Sisyphean style and scale, the promised economic and non-economic goods? Definitely, the politicians would shower blame on the state of economics and the ill-conceived theories of the economists! At times, it reaches a level where all the ills of the

country, including pollution and deforestation, even minority bashing and the sale of gas, are explained by finger pointing at the forces of globalisation, including the World Bank and the IMF. Although intriguing is the cycle of blame and counter-blame, my interest lies more on the milieu reproducing it and the things resulting from it.

The cultural context cannot be denied and the sector which is most stigmatised is the civil society, creating, as we shall soon see, short- and long-term complications for the macro-micro linkages. For reasons of colonialism and over-powered state structures, South Asia is devoid of a civil society with civilising and consenting roles.¹³ It is mostly polarised and violent, leading to competition and conflict in almost all spheres of life and living, often with disastrous consequences. Earlier in the context of donor-sponsored policy prescriptions,¹⁴ I have outlined four areas where competition and conflict in the state and society have influenced, distorted and impeded the realisation of such policy prescriptions. A quick look at the four areas will definitely add to our understanding of the problems involved in initiating and reproducing the linkages.

The first is the GO-NGO clash over the use of donor funds. This has lately been resolved, not so much by creative effort as by pushing for greater GO-NGO co-operation; that is, *governmentalising* the NGOs! At the same time, the GO-NGO clash over donor funds is bound to produce two sets of reports on the policy prescriptions and in the process distort and even impede their realisations.

The second area relates to the partisan approach to any donor-sponsored activity. To give an example, if the Awami League takes over the task of implementing a donor-led policy, it will be opposed by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and vice versa for no other reason than the sake of opposition. In the process, many a policy, even when well intended, has failed to materialise simply because the

political opposition, when gaining power, has downgraded or abandoned it lest it be taken as the success story of its rival. Nothing can be more pathetic than this.

The third area is well known but seldom admitted: inter-ministerial, inter-NGO, and even inter-think tank rivalry and competition over donor funds. In recent times, this has attained a critical dimension, with NGOs and research centres even ceasing to share information on donor projects unless the said project is fully completed and published. This has not only led to the proliferation of almost identical data collection but data suppression. In a situation like this, the donor-sponsored policies, even when researched, evaluated and implemented, is bound to get distorted and suffer.

The last area is hardly brought into the public discussion but is present everywhere: intra-ministerial, intra-NGO, and intra-think tank – if not individual - competition over donor funds. So intense is the rivalry in this area that the nature of group/personal relationships often are dictated by the amount of access or success one group/individual has in dealing with the donors. In a way this reflects the very nature of a polarised society, including the latter's obsession with secrecy.

This is further compounded by the fact that often the “foreign” and “international” donors are grouped together to create yet another layer of conflict within the society, one that is best depicted in the categorisation of the *indigenous* (the latter advocating national self-reliance) and the *external* (the latter forming an organic part of the imperial or neo-colonial forces). Proponents of the said categorisation remain delusive of the fact that the category of “international,” while counterpoised to the national, is inclusive of both internal and external. Bangladesh membership in UN bodies is a good example in this context. But whatever may be the intellectual

and empirical basis of this position the critic is no less powerful; it does contribute to the suspicion and mistrust of the international bodies on the part of the locals, jeopardising further the developmental initiatives of the former.

What can one hope from a situation like this? What macro-micro linkage can one contemplate when self-seeking competition and rivalry are so pervasive and entrenched in the society? If this can be referred to as the structural basis of poverty, what newer structures do we need to alleviate or eradicate poverty? I am reminded here of Rabindranath Tagore who long before poverty alleviation became a household word and a full-time vocation for some had said,

Poverty springs from disunity and wealth from co-operation.

From all points of view this is the fundamental truth of human civilization.¹⁵

Can we then initiate structures for co-operation solely with the purpose of alleviating poverty? Or, does it have to be a part of a broader process? Before venturing on these issues let me quickly reflect on two or more things that tend to complicate the macro-micro linkages.

In fact, the civil society is further constrained by the fact that it is informed by the Western notion of the term with its strong emphasis on urbanity.¹⁶ An urbanised civil society, however, tends to reproduce a city-centrism catering mainly to the power of the macro. In the absence of social and civil activities of a significant nature in the rural areas this cannot be helped. But more interesting is the fact that even those who are engaged in micro level activities, providing credit to poor rural people, tend to build their headquarters in cities. Both BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and Grameen, even with rural nomenclatures, ended up having massive headquarters in the city and that again, in the capital city of Dhaka!

So long macro-micro linkage subsumes city-rural linkage it must desist from being city-centric. In this context, 'who defines the problem – who controls the agenda?' becomes critical.

Added to this is the factor of *governmentality*,¹⁷ which too limits creative effort on the part of the locals, particularly community organisations and the like. Although its basis is longer and socially more ingrained in South Asia, there is always the tendency of reproducing the power of the government when the latter is involved in the process. More fundamentally, the non-governmental agency in the wake of its interaction with the government and that again, on issues at the micro level, often end up governmentalising itself, killing thereby the very purpose of initiating activities at the micro level with disempowered poor people.

Finally, the issue of *engendering* the macro-micro linkages remains critical, although it is true that the bulk of the activities under such linkages for alleviating poverty have mainly concentrated on women. The cultural context is critical here, particularly for sustaining the things arising out of the linkages. Let me give an example.

The market is inclusive of both psycho-geographical and politico-economic categories. It is a good area to judge the newfound capacity of the women as well as the success of the macro-micro linkages. But as Sen once pointed out, "The overall achievements of the market are deeply contingent on political and social arrangements."¹⁸ In fact, the interactions that take place in the market need not be gender-neutral. On the contrary, in South Asia it is highly gendered, particularly in the sense of it being thoroughly masculinised. This is best captured not by the occidental term "market" but by the oriental term "bazaar," where women's access to it and women accessing it remain equally problematic; indeed, to an

extent that at times even the empowered women resist going to the market more as a sign of empowerment!¹⁹

What must be done then to foster and deepen the macro-micro linkages? Several things but let me highlight very briefly four. Firstly, there is a need to democratise the senses. GO listening to NGOs and civil society actors could be a good beginning, but I have something more fundamental than this. National and University curricula have not served us well, save over-glorifying the power of the government and governmental actors. In this respect, a schooled person is already governmentalised and is less in the position of appreciating things related to micro level issues. Muhammad Yunus once lamented that the economics curriculum at the University level does not orient or school a person befitting for micro level issues. A thorough institutionalised reading of the latter could in fact sensitise those engaged in macro policymaking.

Secondly, democratising developmentality. That there is no one clear path to development is now clear, but then we still preach and practice development in the light of our disciplinary pride and prejudices. In this respect, not only diverse and pluralist understanding and practices of development are to be welcomed but also space needs to be created for advocating and practising alternative development scenarios. Gandhian economics, Yunusonomics and the like need to be explored further and brought into mainstream discussion.

Thirdly, decentralising representation. There is a real need to decentralise the centralised parliament simply for demographic if not for any other reason.²⁰ In the case of Bangladesh I am in favour of introducing divisional parliaments, with one federal parliament with lesser powers. But in the context of the linkage, I believe there is a need to rethink the role of formally elected bodies (*Union Parishods*,

for instance) and those which are *informally* elected/selected, like village organisations or community organisations. How this can be done is a matter of both political will and creative input, although a representation of the latter in *Union Parishod* meetings even as observers and/or opinion providers would go a long way, I believe, in strengthening the micro-macro linkage.

Finally, degovernmentalising governmental power. Decentralisation has thus far taken place not by reducing but by extending the power of the government. This is best exemplified by the fact that with the government-sponsored decentralisation the power and machinery of the centralised police got further institutionalised at the local level. This could very well be labelled as recentralisation of those areas that are loosely connected or are relatively outside the domain of the government. And it is this contradictory structure of *decentralisation and recentralisation* contributing to the “risk of the abuse of power at a decentralized level.” A critical task here would be to degovernmentalise local bodies, that is, freeing the latter from the power of the centralised government. Trust, security, including the task of helping the poor to address their poverty must, for that matter, be bottom up and not top down.

Notes & References

1. See, Report prepared by Rehman Sobhan, "Evaluation of the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP): An Overview," UNDP, 2001 (Unpublished).
2. For an understanding of the relationship between policy, police and policing, see Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in Graham Burchell, et.al., eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 1-48. See also in the same book the article by Pasquale Pasquino titled, "The Atrum Politicum: The Genealogy of Capital – Police and the State of Prosperity," pp.105-117.
3. Yunusonomics stands for the economics and developmental practices of Muhammad Yunus. The term was coined by the author. See Imtiaz Ahmed, "Governance and the International Development Community: Making Sense of the Bangladesh Experience," *Contemporary South Asia*, Oxford (UK), Vol. 8, No. 3 November 1999. See also, Imtiaz Ahmed and Binayak Sen, "Development and the State of Insecurity: The Case of Bangladesh," in Aditi Chowdhury, ed., *Victims of Development in Asia*, Volume II (Hongkong: ARENA, 2002) (in press). One may also include Gandhian economics or even Tagore's contribution to rural development in this order.
4. Understood here in the sense of both government and governmentality. For a closer exposition of the latter, see, Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, et.al., *op.cit.*, pp. 87-104.
5. For insights on psycho-geography, see, Howard Stein, ed., *Development Time, Cultural Space: Studies in Psycho-Geography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1987).
6. This is to distinguish the power of micro-politics in other more creative settings. Feminist movement, gay rights movement, eco-movement, etc. will definitely fall into the category of the latter.
7. This includes a whole range of literature, including, Alan Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982); Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (London: Penguin Books, 1994); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidaas Publishers, 1994); Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: Vintage, 1994); and also, Ann Brooks, *Post Feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997).
8. See, Giovanna Procacci, "Governing Poverty: Sources of the Social Question in Nineteenth-Century France," in Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

9. For a closer exposition on this issue, see, Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). The colonial modernist construction of the hospital did not go unchallenged in India. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote: "Hospitals are institutions for propagating sin." Cited in Prakash, *ibid.*, p.124.
10. See, Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).
11. See, Robert J. Samuelson, "Economics: Why Recovery Is So Slow?" *Newsweek*, Special Davos Edition, December 2001-February 2001, p.70-73.
12. See, Rehman Sobhan, "The Evolving Political Economy of Bangladesh in the Age of Globalization." BIDS Public Lecture, Millennium Celebration Program, 15 January 2002 (Unpublished).
13. For a closer exposition, see Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Efficacy of the Nation State in South Asia: A Post Nationalist Critique* (Colombo: ICES, 1998).
14. See, Imtiaz Ahmed, *op.cit.*, 1999, p.305.
15. Rabindranath Tagore, *Social Work*, 1915. Translated into English by B. N. Ganguli for the Seminar on the Human Factor in the Growth of Rural Economy, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* (Shantiniketan), Vol. 7, 1961, p.30.
16. See, Boris Ford, ed., *The Age of Shakespeare* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), pp.19-20. This is ironic given the fact that Tagore always viewed civil society as *purosamaj* (whole society) as distinct from the *raashtra* (state). See, Satyendranath Roy, ed., *Rabindranather Chintahajagat: Swadesh Chinta* (Calcutta: Gronthaloy Pvt. Ltd., 1988).
17. The "mentality" of relying on the government to reproduce things. For a critical exposition of the concept, see, Foucault, *op.cit.*, 1991. For an interesting description of the relationship between science, governmentality and the state in India, see, Prakash, *op.cit.*
18. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.142.
19. See, Imtiaz Ahmed, "On Feminist Methodology: Can *Mohilas* Speak?" *Theoretical Perspectives*, Dhaka, Vol. II, No. I, 1995.
20. See, Imtiaz Ahmed, "Crisis in Democracy: The Experience of Bangladesh," *Peace Initiatives*, International Centre for Peace Initiatives, New Delhi, Vol. VII, Nos. I-III, January-June 2001.