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STRATEGY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH : A REVIEW

Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, is striving to accelerate the pace of its economic development since 1947, and as an independent country since 1971. A large number of development experiments have been pursued during the period without much benefits for the general masses. These have on the contrary generally widened the gap between rich and the poor and between rural and urban areas, and worsened the overall economic condition of the country. Bangladesh experienced more than one development approaches every five years. Development of Bangladesh appears to be so difficult a challenge that the country has been considered a 'Test Case for Development'.¹ In fact, the continuous experimentations and changes in directions in the field of development could hardly ameliorate the rapidly deteriorating poverty syndrome. The following excerpts may be indicative of the present state of development scenario of the nation.

I do not believe Bangladesh is a hopeless case ... But the circumstances are more difficult than previously imagined.²

The major development problem lies not with the causes of poverty but with a continuous distortion of economic, social and political character.³

1. Just Faaland and J.R. Parkinson, *Bangladesh : The Test Case of Development* (Dhaka : C. Hurst & Co. and University Press Ltd., 1976). p. 18.
2. Josef F. Stepanek, *Bangladesh: Equitable Growth?* (Washington: Pergamon Press, 1974), p. xii.
3. Stefan Devylder, *Agriculture in Chain, Bangladesh : A Case Study in Contradictions and Constraints* (London : Zed Press, 1982), p. 4.

The elements of development strategies are only of transitional character and frankly, they can at the most be considered as means of buying time by the ruling elite.⁴

We do not think Bangladesh will be able to progress at a satisfactory rate unless a concerted effort is made to assist her and provide large amounts of aid over a long period.⁵

Development planning in our country has become an unarrayed list of projects offered by donor countries/organizations.⁶

Planning degenerated into an exercise in using foreign aid for non-development purposes and increasing public sector employment ... Planning Commission became a powerless organization and planning became a hoax.⁷

We are sinking deeper and fast.⁸

Three important features of the economy of the country are discernable from the concerns expressed in the statements. These are: (1) a continuous dependence on foreign aid for development programme in the midst of acute resource shortage; (2) a continuous distortion in the process of whatever development has taken place, and (3) a lack of definite direction in the development programmes. The combined effect of all these is that "We are sinking deeper and fast". The present paper is an attempt to revisit the chain experimentation with development in Bangladesh, with particular focus on the strategies for rural development. Effort is made in what follows here to see how these strategies, instead of bringing tangible benefits to the people have increased mass poverty and widened disparity among various groups of people.

The paper contains four sections. The first section briefly reviews the development strategies pursued in the Third World countries and

4. Muhiuddin Alamgir, *Bangladesh : A Case of Below Poverty Level Equilibrium Trap* (Dhaka : BIDS, 1977), p. 87.
5. Just Faaland & J.R. Parkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
6. Nurul Islam, *Development Planning in Bangladesh* (London : C. Hurst & Co., 1979), p. 2.
7. Abdullah Farouk, *Changes in the Economy of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., (1982), p. 106.
8. M. Younus, quoted in S. De Vylder, *op. cit.*

their succession in the context of rural development. The second section analyses the experiments of major rural development strategies in Bangladesh during last 35 years, while, the third section attempts to examine the institutional and administrative reforms aimed at rural development of the country during the same period. The paper finally concludes with some observations on the outcome of all these chain experimentations.

I

Exploring the reasons for successive experimentation with development approach in Bangladesh, a country which so badly needs development, it is possible to identify two sets of explanations. Firstly, the problem lies with the concept of 'development' itself. People define development in different ways. There was a time when poverty and backwardness were considered to be 'natural'.⁹ The word development came into the economic literature in Post-World War II era. Since then, the definition of and models for development have been changing frequently and most of the experiments are being tried in the Third World countries. Secondly, the nature of the problems of development is not same in developed and developing countries. For the developed nations the primary concern includes the protection of their own economies from their inherent problems of recession, increasing unemployment and inflation which are partly the outcome of their affluence and technological advancement.¹⁰ The developing countries for their part are in the grip of widespread poverty, malnutrition and unemployment. These two different sets of problems have been intertwined (by the West) in such a manner that

9. ESCAP, *Guide Lines for Rural Centre Planning* (New York : United Nations, 1979), p. 23.

10. Q.K. Ahmad, "Explorations in Development Alternatives: An Overview", *Fifth General Meeting* (Association of Development Research and Training, Institutes of Asia and the Pacific (ADIPA), 2-5 June, 1983), Kuala Lumpur.

the developed countries can largely protect their economy by making the developing countries dependent on them.¹¹ The implication of this policy is that the developed nations tend to prescribe a variety of development models for the poorer developing nations who by virtue of their inherent weakness and dependency syndrome have little option but to try to replicate models although they hardly conform to the specific situations prevailing in these nations.

The growth-oriented development models of 1950s and 1960s, (i.e. Green Revolution, Urban Industrial Development etc.), for example, were adopted within the broad framework of two main sectors—the traditional and modern—focusing though specially on the modern sector. The assumption was that the modern sector would expand by gradually absorbing the traditional sector.¹² The problem was perceived to lie mainly with the demand for technology and capital investment, which were assured from the developed countries. The essence of these strategies was, therefore, to use imported capital and technology and transfer of labour from traditional to modern sector. A highly skewed distribution of income was also considered as essential for these models for a successful economic growth.¹³ It was assumed that the gap between the rich and poor would eventually be narrowed down by a trickle down effect. But these strategies failed to achieve any significant positive outcome for the millions of Third World population and the benefits have not trickled down to the poor people as was assumed. The impact, if any, has been the widening of the rich-poor gap within these countries.

In the late 1960s many alternative approaches were prescribed as reforms of conventional models. Labour intensive techniques and adoption of appropriate technology etc. are examples.¹⁴ Such reforms

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. J.R. Friedmann, "Basic Needs, Agropolitan Development and Planning from Below", *World Development* (Vol. 7, No. 6, June 1979), pp. 16-35.

also failed to produce any tangible result mainly because of their incomprehensive nature. In the early 1970s the understanding of the concept of development shifted its course again. It was realized that development is not merely economic growth but also 'a condition in which people in a country have adequate food and jobs and the income inequalities among them are greatly reduced.'¹⁵ In the subsequent efforts, however, the emphasis was given on a new variable—growth with 'equity.'

During this time various organizations of the United Nations reviewed the poverty syndrome in the developing countries apparently in an effort to play a role in removing this syndrome.¹⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that in 1972 some 1200 million people in the developing market economies (67 percent of the total population in these countries) were seriously poor, and 700 million (39 percent) were destitutes and suffering from malnutrition.¹⁷ In spite

The Basic Needs Approach, like others, suffered from many limitations. Most importantly, the problem as to who decided what were the basic needs of the people and what were the modalities for satisfying those, remained unresolved.

some growth in production the poor could not be benefitted much because enough employment opportunity were not created. Moreover, the distribution of income shows a distorted pattern to the disadvantage of masses and such distortions tend to be perpetuated by limited access of the disadvantaged to land, credit, education, employment and other basic services. In this context the UNICEF, put

15. A.L. Mabogunje, *The Development Process; A Spatial Perspective* (London : Hutchinson University Library, 1980), p. 35.
16. United Nations, *The Third Development Decade* (New York : UN, 1980), p. 20.
17. Quoted by Ejazul Huq, *Basic Needs Approach : Planning for Core Needs in Bangladesh* (Dhaka : University Press Ltd. 1984), p. 31.

forward the basic services approach focusing on the provision of the daily need of the people such as safe drinking water, nutritious food, vaccination, education, etc.¹⁸

The ILO in 1976 offered a wider approach popularly known as Basic Need Approach which involved the fulfilment of two types of needs: the basic minimum requirement of the people and their basic essential services.¹⁹

Basic Need Approach, like other approaches, also suffered from many constraints. The conceptual problem as to who decided what were basic needs of the people, remained unresolved. Secondly, providing basic services to the target population required an efficient local body to take decision and tackle many localized problems. This second problem indeed entailed the whole gamut of issues related with the modality of satisfying the basic needs. The issues were of course linked with such matters as institution-building, participation and devolution of power.

The World Bank for its part suggested to adopt poverty-oriented strategies and expressed its concern over the monopolisation of benefits of the Green Revolution by the rich farmers. In 1972, the World Bank emphasised clearly on attaining 'equity'; in 1973, urged for paying more attention to small farmers; and in 1975 it indicated to bring out the poorer section of the society into the process of development. Latter in 1980, The World Bank again emphasized on providing services to the poorer section of rural areas. One of the examples of such strategies is creating service centres/growth centres in the rural areas.

The main argument behind creating such service centres is that the rural development projects often failed because they were not linked

18. UNICEF, "Assignment Children", No. 41, (Geneva : January-March 1978), p. 23.

19. ILO, *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs : A One World Problem* (Geneva, 1976).

in any way with the emerging central place in the rural areas.²⁰ But empirical evidences are now available that the services provided through such centres are not only set apart from rural areas physically but also economically and the centres become more a part of the urban system rather than of the rural.²¹ An integration of national economy is, therefore, essential in terms of organizing spaces at local, regional and national level and providing basic services to the rural people. Spatial organization means a hierarchically developed spatial system inter-linked by physical, economic and social variables. Rural development, therefore, requires a planned effort to transform rural areas from traditional isolation to integrated modern society. The objectives of rural development indeed extend beyond any particular sector and encompass improved productivity, increased employment as well as minimum acceptable levels of food, shelter, education and health services in the rural community as an integral part of rural system. The governments of the Third World countries began experimenting not only with new approaches to economic and social development, but also with new political, administrative and institutional reforms for implementing the rural development programme. 'Decentralization' of authority for planning and participation of the people at the local level, for example, is an oft-used concept these days in the Third World countries. Other reformist policies like cooperative movement, effective local government, youth development etc., are also experimented in order to achieve increased productivity and community solidarity and for mobilizing human and financial resources for development activities. An effort has been made in the subsequent sections to see how Bangladesh experimented its rural development strategies including some institutional reforms as a part of the broader objective of national development.

20. D.A. Rondinelli, "Small Towns in Developing Countries: Political Centres of Growth, Transformation and Integration", in H.D. Kammaier and Peter J. Swan (eds.) *Equity and Growth* (Bangkok: AIT, 1984) p. 105

21. H.D. Dias, "Can Small Towns Help Farmers?" in H.D. Kammaier and Peter J. Swan (eds.) *ibid.* p. 174.

II

In the 1950s development was sought in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) through a programme-oriented community development strategy, aiming mainly at rural development. The emphasis of this programme was on an optimum utilization of human resources and providing basic services in a manner that the life pattern of the people can be changed.²² The programme, in fact, was limited to building physical infrastructure like schools, hospitals, roads, community centre etc., with some other basic services like sanitation and medical facilities to improve health condition. The strategy could not achieve much success mainly due to (a) a bias of the development activities in favour of urban growth. Most of the schools, community centres, hospitals, roads and water supply networks were built in the towns and cities, except a few show-piece rural development measures like construction of some bridges and culverts. (b) The community development strategy was not comprehensive in terms of emphasis on production, particularly in the agriculture sector and therefore, the objective of raising productivity was not achieved. (c) The implementation of the programme was pursued by a complex administrative structure which was not comprehended by the rural people. Moreover, expansion of the programme and its hasty execution took place without any sound conceptual basis and organizational preparations.²³ The community development programme was however, replaced with V-AID, a new strategy initiated in 1953.

V-AID (Village Agricultural and Industrial Development) programme was initiated with two-fold aims, to stimulate development activities through self-help basis and to promote cooperative efforts among the villagers by uniting them around their common needs. To

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22. A. R. Khan, "Rural Development in Bangladesh : Major Issues Revisited", *BISS Journal* (Vol. 5, No. 4, 1984), p. 455.
23. Rainer Wulf, "On the Concept of Integrated Rural Development", *Economics* (Vol. 17, 1974), p. 65.

carry out these objectives a team of extension agents consisting of Area Advisory Committees, Village Councils, Development officers, Supervisors and Village Workers was created.²⁴ The team was supposed to plan for rural development with the help of an advisory committee under the leadership of a development officer. Unlike the Community Development Programme, V-AID was launched on an administrative footing, although the administrative and institutional supports were highly inadequate to realize its objectives.²⁵ There was no effective coordination among the workers as well as decision makers. Moreover, the local authority was too much dependent on the centre for making any decision. Thus, in terms of impacts, the programme did not attain significant measure of success.²⁶ The programme was, discarded in 1961.

Considering the shortcomings of the strategies of 1950s an alternative approach was adopted in the early 1960s whereby development activities were to focus basically on economic aspects. The main strategies were the elimination of obstacles from raising productivity in the rural areas, particularly in agriculture. Modern technology including HYV were considered an easy way to increase agricultural production. In the name of 'Green revolution', this growth-based strategy was practiced for a few years. Although the strategy achieved a considerable success in the then West Pakistan, as did similar strategies in the Indian state of Punjab and also some other parts of the world, in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) it failed do so particularly for its departure from the perspective of a comprehensive development. In spite of increase in the production in the agricultural sector to a notable extent no substantial change in the life of majority people in the rural areas was marked. The 'Green Revolution'

24. A.R. Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

25. M. Alamgir, "The Experience of Rural Works Programme in Bangladesh", A Paper submitted to the Development Planning Division, ESCAP (Bangkok : 1977), pp. 3-4.

26. A.M.A. Muhith, *Thoughts on Development Administration* (Dhaka : Sabiha Muhith, 1981), p. 43.

was pursued without bringing any change in the prevailing mode of production in the rural areas. Tenants and small farmers did not have adequate access to facilities that were provided by the government. As a result income disparities within the rural community further widened.

In the late 1960s, the main focus has been shifted from Green Revolution to a comprehensive Area Development Approach, and included two other programmes with it. First, the Rural Works Programme was undertaken to generate employment opportunity, to develop infrastructure, and to create an effective nucleus for planning and development at the grass root level.²⁷ The Works Programme was supported by massive imports of food grain from the United States under PL 480, which in fact, still continues. Second, the political system of Basic Democracy was introduced to provide an institutional framework for development activities.²⁸

As for methods adopted in Rural Works Programme (RWP), planning was to be the responsibility of local government at various level: (the levels of Basic Democracy), specially the Thana and Union

The emphasis in the 1950s was on urban and industrial development and in the 1960s on productivity. The strategics however, failed to produce desired results, particularly in the agriculture sector. The 1970s were not any different.

Councils. The Councils was supposed to prepare a Five-Year Plan for Thana as well as for Union in such a manner that, it can be

27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

28. Rehman Sobhan, *Basic Democracies, Works Programme and Rural Development in East Pakistan* (Dhaka : Bureau of Economic Research, 1968), p. 151.

incorporated in the district plan and also in national plan.²⁹ It was expected that by this bottom-up planning process and management by local project committee, popular participation of the people could be ensured, and planning would be an appropriate one.³⁰ But in reality the Works Programme created employment opportunity only on a seasonal basis and was itself turned into a sectoral approach rather than a comprehensive area development one.

A controlled experiment was done in the 1960s under the name of Comilla Model. The objective was to develop local interest and leadership for an internally motivated effort to solve the agrarian problems through a specific type of rural institution. The model introduced a two-tier cooperative system : *Krishi Samabaya Samity* (KSS) at the village level and *Thana Central Cooperative Association* (TCCA) at the then Thana level as a federation of the KSS.³¹ The main function of the TCCA was to provide credit facilities, inputs to agriculture and training to the workers to overcome the problems and limitations at the village level. The cooperative system under Comilla model was developed on the basis of main three components: 1) Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC), 2) Rural Works Programme (RWP) and 3) Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP). All these experimentations were initially limited to the Comilla Kotwali Thana and during 1966-68 the experiments were extended to ten other Thanas of Comilla District.³² Although the Comilla model is generally considered to be a successful one, the model lost much of its attractions when it was expanded outside Comilla district.

After the independence, the Government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman adopted a new approach called 'Integrated Rural Development Programme' (IRDP). It was indeed superimposed on the

29. Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) *The Works of Akhter Hameed Khan, Vol. III : Rural Works and Comilla Cooperative* (Comilla, BARD, 1983), p. 135.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

31. A.R. Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 460.

32. *Ibid.*.

Comilla Model, combining its major three components—the TIP, the RWP and TTDC.³³ The only new dimension added with the programme was that of supervised credit facilities.

IRDP was adopted as one of the national development strategies in the First Five Year Plan (1973-1978) with the aim of a more integrative approach encompassing all development sectors and social groups (landless, women, artisan etc.) in the rural areas. At the initial stage of the plan period, the expansion of the programme was very rapid and consequently it suffered in its efficiency. Although providing credit facilities was the main objective of IRDP, in practice, the authority could not provide more than 15 percent of the total credit requirement through institutional means.³⁴ Secondly, Comilla Model was devised in a particular area under a controlled situation with highly developed management system. But when it was expanded these conditions could not be fulfilled. Thirdly, the programme did not accurately consider problems associated with the prevailing socio-political situation in the rural areas in terms of distribution of landlessness, unemployment and domination of rural power elites. The result was that the large farmers and those in local power structure began to dominate. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the IRDP suffered serious setbacks in terms of its integration problem, although the programme was called an 'integrated' one. More and more offices of different types were set up at the Thana level to provide a variety of services which lacked badly in integration and coordination.

In 1974, a new programme called Food for Works was introduced parallel to the RWP with the assistance of the World Food Programme, and was subsequently merged with RWP. At present RWP is no longer associated with IRDP.³⁵

33. A.M.A. Muhith, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

34. The total credit requirement was estimated US\$ 500 million a year. See A.M.A. Muhith, *op. cit.*; p. 51.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Table : Major Rural Development Strategies in Bangladesh 1950-1980

Year	Major development programmes	Main objectives and target population	Main Strategies	Consequences and beneficiaries
1950	Community Development Programmes	-To change life pattern of the people, providing basic services and utilizing resources at an optimum level.	-Development of infrastructure, i.e. schools, roads, community centres, health facilities and water supply etc.	-Mostly done in urban areas. -The programme was not rural development oriented and therefore, the rural people were not benefitted out of this strategy. Moreover, it did not emphasise on agriculture.
1953	V-AID (Village Agricultural and Industrial Development programme)	-Stimulating self help and cooperative efforts among the villagers for their economic welfare and to fulfil their common needs.	-Dev. of physical and social infrastructure. -Youth Development and agricultural dev. through Irrigation and land reclamation etc.	-Although the emphasis was on both agriculture and industry sector, in reality much attention were not given on agriculture. Therefore, the poor rural people got nothing out of this programme.
1960	Green Revolution	-To increase agricultural Production, income and capital of the rural people	-Introduced modern and semi modern Technology. -Introduced model cooperative system -Introduced HYV seed etc. -Increased facilities for irrigation.	-Increased agricultural production of the rich farmers because these people had access to the productive resources. -The landless and marginal landowners were not benefitted by the Green Revolution programme.
1974	IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme) A modified version of Green Revolution, famous as Comilla Model	-Providing credit facility to the poor farmers through cooperatives. -Generating non-agricultural activities for the landless farmers through Works Programme; -Providing other institutional facilities for the rural people.	-Formed two tier cooperatives -All agricultural inputs were supplied through cooperatives. -Establish Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC) -IRDP office was established. in every Thana	-The IRDP helped the rich people only -Works Programme were only seasonal basis, so unemployment remained as same as before. -Small land owners kept out of cooperatives and did not get much incentive from agricultural inputs. -Rich became rich and poor became more poor.

Table : Major Rrnl Development Strategies (contd.)

Year	Major development programmes	Main objectives and target population	Main Strategies	Consequences and beneficiaries
1962-1974	Employment generating Programmes: a) Rural Works Programmes, etc. (1962) b) Food for Works Programme (1972)	-To stimulate people in development and building infrastructure -To provide employment opportunity for the rural poor, and particularly the seasonal unemployed landless labourers.	1) Canal digging for agricultural development 2) Mass participation in the economic activities 3) Building rural infrastructure during the period of slack agricultural season.	-These programmes provided employment only for 2-3 percent of the unemployed people. The programmes were not production oriented.
1976	Area Development Approach	-An integrated development for the grass root people particularly to help the Bittayhin (Destitutes) and poor women section of the people by providing employment opportunity -Building rural infrastructure. -Building rural institutions.	-Building model cooperative and providing other input and credit facilities.	-The project did not cover the whole country. It was started in some selected districts. The programme is still going on. No evaluation is available as yet
1976	Swanirvor Programme	-Locally sponsored village oriented selfsufficiency programme for the villagers themselves	-Voluntary participation in the development work in the villages. -Building local institutions -Mass mobilization	-The programme was continuing although proper support from the government was not ensured. After the inception of Upazila programme it was discarded.

Source : Md. Narul Islam (Nazem), "Upazila Approach to Decentralize Development in Bangladesh: An Examination of its Efficacy" Unpublished Masters Thesis (No. HS-85-9) submitted to the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok, 1985. pp. 27-28

The rural development strategy took a new shape in 1976 under Area Development Approach. Keeping agricultural production at the core, the programme emphasized on building institutions, creating employment opportunities and improvement on rural infrastructure. The projects started with assistance of some international agencies (like IDA, IDB, DANIDA, etc.) in different areas of the country. The difference between this approach and the previous ones was important at least in terms of conceptualization of the problem. The programme emphasized on a strong local body in decision-making and organization of local people. Location specific programmes were organised and efforts were geared towards attaining greater coordination among the development agents.

Like IRDP, the Area Development approach also adopted co-operative model for the promotion of its programme. The innovation in this programme was the formation of *Bittyohin Samabya Samiti* (BSS) and *Mahila Samabaya Samiti* (MSS) in order to organize the disadvantaged poor and help them towards income generating activities.³⁶ All these programmes are now being promoted under a permanent organization called Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) which replaced the IRDP.

III

Every successive regime in the country since 1947 made new efforts to institutionalize development administration which more often than not, was a part of its political ambitions of continuing in power. Before introducing a new measure, it has been generally observed, each regime criticised the previous systems, in terms of their shortcomings and disadvantages mainly to prepare a ground to introduce the new one. During the Pakistan period, between 1947 and 1963, as many as 28 commissions or committees were formed, of which 22 committees

36. BARD, *Prokalpa Parchiti* : RD-2 (Comilla, BARD, 1984),

were appointed by President Ayub Khan alone.³⁷ The avowed objectives of appointing all these commissions were to find out the weaknesses and short comings of existing administrative machineries and to make recommendations to evolve a system suitable to the needs and aspirations of the people. None of these commissions, however, touched the main issues like building an institution at the local level, ensuring people's participation in development activities etc. They focused on the contrary on peripheral issue³⁸ like reorganization of services, pay and allowances, federal-provincial relations etc.

Basic Democracy, it has already been mentioned, replaced the earlier provincial type of local government. It was a four tiered system, the union being the lowest in the hierarchy followed by Thana, District and Division. Each of these tiers was administered by a separate council. The development programmes at the rural and local levels were executed by the Union and Thana councils. The difference between the Thana and the Union council was remarkable. The union had a purely people's representative body, but they virtually did not have the power of execution. Thana Council, on the other hand, had representative members from the people and similar number of members from amongst the government officials as an ex-officio, headed by a Sub-divisional Officer (SDO), who was also a government official.³⁹ People's representative body, therefore, was always dominated by government officials.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the Awami League Government appointed an administrative reform committee. According to the recommendations of the committee, the Government made an

37. A.N. Shamsul Hoque, *Administrative Reforms in Pakistan* (Dhaka : National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) 1970), p. 87,

38. Shaikh Maqsood Ali, et. al. *Decentralization and Peoples Participation in Bangladesh* (Dhaka : NIPA, 1983), Tables 1 & 2, pp. 50-54.

39. A Subdivisional Officer was the head of a subdivision—an administrative tier just above the Thana. After introducing Upazila system the subdivision tier has been abolished.

effort to a complete restructuring of the bureaucracy in such a manner that all civil servants were organized in single class.⁴⁰ By doing this the role of erstwhile CSPs (Civil Service of Pakistan) was heavily undermined and they were compelled to operate at a low profile. By the end of 1974, one could observe the disastrous consequences of this reform, culminating in complete breakdown of law and order.⁴¹ The Government of Sheikh Mujib was forced to retreat from its policy and place the 'CSPs' at the key positions once again.

In the same year (1975), the Awami League Government introduced a one-party system. Under this system, the former Divisions and Subdivisions as tiers of administration were abolished and all former Subdivisions were upgraded into Districts. These new Districts were to be governed by a District Governor appointed by the Party.⁴² The Districts were to be the focus of all development activities. An administrative council was also designed in which the governor would be the Chairman. Other members of the council were supposed to be nominated by the party and some would be selected as ex-officio members from the government. The council was supposed to coordinate all the development activities within the district. The reform however did not specify as to how such coordination would take place, nor was there sufficient time to observe how the proposed system might have evolved in practice. After the change of government in 1975, the one party political system in the district administration was immediately abolished.

In February 1976, the new government issued a circular⁴³ which restored previously abolished Divisions and Subdivisions as tiers of

40. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *Group Interests and Political Changes : Studies of Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi : South Asia Publishers, 1982), pp. 201-202.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

42. The system introduced under a District Administration Act, No. VI, 1975, quoted in Shaikh Maqsood Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

43. Government of Bangladesh, Circular No. CD, DA 73-75, 170 (1000) dated 27 February, 1976.

administration. The circular identified the Divisional Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, Subdivisional Officer and the Circle officer (Development) as the chief coordinators at their respective levels and gave authority to take effective measures in implementing the government policies.⁴⁴ For a more effective implementation of the policies the government identified one Thana from each district as a pilot scheme and gave responsibility to the officers belonging to that locality under the policy of own Village Development (OVD).⁴⁵ This experiment continued for about one year and the idea was abandoned when the government found it unsuitable.⁴⁶

In the same year, the Government passed an ordinance to the effect that for the purpose of overall development of the village, government may constitute a Village *Parishad* (council).⁴⁷ By an amendment of this ordinance a new concept of 'Gram Sarkar' was introduced in April 1980.⁴⁸ An 11-member 'Gram Sarkar' was formed in each village on the basis of 'consensus'. The head of the Sarkar was called 'Gram Pradhan'. The other members were selected from among the village people to reflect certain degree of representation. The 'Gram Sarkar' created both bitter controversy and great enthusiasm in the country.⁴⁹ The concept lacked proper definition, definite linkages upwards and downwards and clear jurisdiction of responsibilities. The parallel existence of Union Parishad and 'Gram Sarkar' and the conspicuous overemphasis on 'Gram Sarkar' by the Government created conflicting situations. 'Consensus' as the avowed basis for creation of the Sarkar was questioned from various quarters. Moreover, it had no power to tax or raise fund. It was expected to raise

44. S. M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

47. Government of Bangladesh, *Local Government Ordinance 1976*, No. XL of 1976, Dhaka : November 22, 1976.

48. Kamal Siddique, et. al. (ed.), *Local Government in Bangladesh* (Dhaka : NILG, 1985), p. 57.

49. *The Daily Sangbad*, "Gram Sarkar : Bortoman O Bhabishwat" (Gram Sarkar : Present & Future) Post editorial, Dhaka : 19 April, 1980

funds from individual contributions, cooperative societies and from other local institutions although no specific guidelines were set up for the mode of such fund-raising. After about two years of experimentation, however, the system was abolished by a Martial Law Order in July 1982 by the succeeding government, which came into power in March of the same year.

The real outcome of all these reform measures is most obviously very little. It could perhaps hardly be otherwise because of the very transitional and ad-hoc nature of each of them, if not for anything else. The reforms largely failed to boost the process of development and on the contrary, contributed to the widening of poverty and disparity among the people. Instead of peoples' participation in

In reality, the reforms helped the political regimes consolidate their power in collaboration with local vested groups which the common people remained outside the mainstream of the process and impact of development.

development administration and decentralization, power and authority concentrated more and more at the top level and worsened the overall socio-economic situation of the country. The new government in 1982 introduced a new strategy called the *Upazila* (sub-district) system, aimed particularly at ensuring a rural-based decentralized pattern of development in the country.

The new approach is particularly aimed at development of rural areas. Under the *Upazila* system more power has to be delegated to the people's representatives to take decision, to initiate plan and to implement policies at the local level. To fulfill these objectives more financial authority is being delegated to the *Upazila* level where comparatively high ranking official have been appointed. Elaborate financial and administrative arrangements have been made

for rural-based decentralization of planning and management of development in the country. The system is at its nascent stage and it would be premature to comment as to the extent of its success.

IV

One of the constitutionally guaranteed policies in Bangladesh is to adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens and of opportunities in order to attain uniform level of economic development throughout the republic.⁵⁰ The policy particularly emphasizes on a transformation of rural areas so as to progressively remove disparity. In reality, the disparity has been continuously widening between rural and urban, rich and poor, men and women throughout the country.

The successive governments have made several attempts to eradicate poverty and disparities through various measures as discussed above. It has also been pointed out that though the production had increased, it did not benefit the large section of the people due to skewed distribution of land and other productive resources. The employment generating programmes such as Food for Works, Rural Works and Canal Digging, etc. could provide employment only for 1.5 percent of the total mandays available in the country.⁵¹

In the recent years, various types of target group oriented programmes sponsored by local and foreign NGOs and the government itself were taken to remove poverty. According to one estimate about 600 NGOs are working in the country. Among the government's programmes, Grameen Bank is an important attempt in terms

50. *The Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh*, article 14.

51. M. Siddiqueer Rahman, et. al., "Dimension of Disparity and Inequality in Bangladesh", paper presented in a Training Seminar on *Rural Centre and Settlement Planning*. sponsored by Ministry of LGRD, govt. of Bangladesh and UNESCAP, Dhaka, 10-19 December 1984. p. 76.

of its potentials to help the rural poor. The Grameen Bank, devoted primarily to organising the landless rural poor and destitute and to financing of income and employment generating productive activities for these groups, has already been landed both within and outside the country. This, unfortunately, is an exception rather than the rule for such programmes in Bangladesh. The objectives of all these programmes are novel and ideal. The net result in macro terms is therefore frustrating.

Gap between the Rich and Poor

The gap between rich and the poor which is already striking is on the increase. The food and energy intake is continuously declining

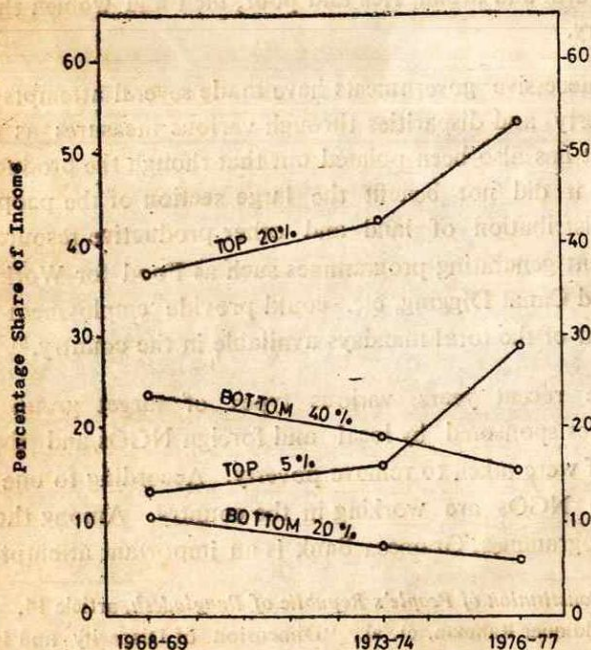


Figure : Trend of Income Distribution Among Various Recipient Groups.

Source : Planning Commission of Bangladesh, 1983

and the population living below poverty level is therefore increasing.⁵² According to an estimate by Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 83 percent of the people were living below the poverty line in 1977-78.⁵³ A continuously widening gap between the rich and poor over a recent decade shown in the Figure. Starting from 1968-69 the share of national income of the poorer groups had fallen and that of the richer section had increased. This trend took a sharp increase for richer section since 1973-74, particularly in the case of top 5 percent while the bottom 40 percent of the poorer section experienced a continuous fall in income. If this serious situation is allowed to continue, it will further erode away the already deteriorating living condition of that section.

Disparity between Rural and Urban Areas

The rural mass are deprived of their basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health, education and other social services compared to their counterparts in the urban areas. For example, one doctor is available per 900 people in urban areas, compared to the same for 65,000 people in the rural areas.⁵⁴ The literacy rate for urban areas is 38 percent against only 15 percent among the rural people. 25 percent of the rural people cannot manage more than one cloth; 45 percent do not have access to safe drinking water and about 50 percent of them do not have adequate shelter.⁵⁵ The economic disparity is also clear between rural and urban areas in terms of both the rural rich vis-a-vis urban rich and rural poor against urban poor. Although about 15 percent of the country's total population are urban residents, 35 percent of governments' total revenue expenditure goes in favour of urban people under a normal budget.⁵⁶ Besides, other public expendi-

52. Daily intake below 2332 kilo calorie per person. Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, PS Nutrition Survey (Dhaka : 1975).

53. M. Siddiquer Rahman, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 76.

54. Stefan de Vylder, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-34.

55. M. Siddiquer Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

56. *Ibid.*

tures also serve directly or indirectly the urban sector at the cost of the rural. Agriculture and rural development sectors, for instance, usually receive less than 20 percent of the development expenditure, while the other sectors such as industry, power, physical planning, transport, housing, education, health and social welfare services, which ultimately benefit the urban people receive major portion of (80%) the public expenditure.⁵⁷ Even within agricultural sector proper, a large part (over 40 percent on the average during last five years) of the expenditure is allocated to subsidise agricultural input items, the ultimate benefit of which are usually received by the large farmers.⁵⁸

The society has been virtually fragmented into two major factions, the privileged few and the deprived mass, the size of the latter increasing at an alarming rate.

On the other hand, heavy subsidy in large amount of imported food for urban upper and middle classes appears as a disincentive to agricultural production. One further paradox is that the government tries to keep the prices of food grains artificially low (for its political sensitivity) at the cost of the vital interest of the huge masses in rural areas.

The Reasons for Disparity

The preceding discussions about the chain experimentations of development activities and its resultant scenarios in Bangladesh show a frustrating picture. There are a number of reasons why individual projects and programmes failed to achieve any positive outcome. One can criticise a programme in terms of its appropriateness, objectives,

57. Ataul Huq Pramanik, *Development Through Urban Bias Public Expenditure : An Emperical Study of Bangladesh* (Dhaka : Centre for Social Studies, 1982), Table 20, p. 198.

58. Recently Subsidies have, however, been reduced from some of the agricultural inputs like fertiliser, pesticides etc.

selection of target groups, mechanisms and so on. There are some other important reasons affecting the programmes both at the local and national levels.

At the local level one can identify at least four common factors which might be held responsible for the failure of the previous programmes and policies. In the first place, as organizational or administrative problems were very serious, coordination at the multi-sectoral level was almost impossible. Second, there were uncertainties about the institutional apparatus and mechanism. Third, frequent changes in project design were required due to inappropriate planning. Thus, what was considered first rate yesterday turns out to be impracticable today. And finally, a bureaucratic and centralized system of administration along with the prevailing power structures made the local level development administration rather ineffective.

The traditional power elites with their political control and influence are being joined by the emerging landowners to gain and perpetuate more power and influence to control the rural and local areas.⁵⁹ In the present power structure, the vast majority of the rural people are dominated politically, economically and socially by a few power wielders. "It has been established beyond doubt that there is an unequal distribution of power in the rural society of Bangladesh any rural development effort aiming at the betterment of all sections of the rural population is bound to fail".⁶⁰ The way these local leaders control and exploit the whole society appears to have an in-built advantage of making the anomalies perpetuating. They are involved in local factionalism and litigations and often collaborate with power politics and they believe in feudal value and use religion and superstition to exploit common people and indulge

59. A. Chowdhury, *A Bangladesh Village : A Study of Social Stratification* (Dhaka : Center for Social Studies, 1978). p. 133.

60. A. Chowdhury, *Agrarian Social Relations and Rural Development in Bangladesh* (New Delhi : Oxford IBH Publishing Co., 1982), p. 64.

in corruption.⁶¹ By using their linkages with the bureaucrats and higher level politicians, these leaders manage to control the mechanism of local level development programmes. Usually it is very difficult to get services without the courtesy of local leaders, who in turn are linked with urban vested groups and power-mongers.

At the national level, some mutually related factors may be identified. These are, lack of an appropriate policy direction, continued political instability and frequent policy shifts. It is apparent that every successive government wanted to introduce a new system of its own which means abolishing the previous system or systems. The duration of the new system, therefore, depends on the longevity of the particular regime in power. These experiments cannot be helpful in achieving economic development, rather, they lead to the decay of the political, administrative and economic institutions.

Frequent changes of the policies cause only bewilderment in the people's mind. A workable system can possibly be developed over time through trial and error. For this, a considerable period of time is required. Due to political instability and total rejection of past policies by the successive government, proper evaluation of the system has hardly been possible. Moreover, these frequent changes of policies have also a long term implication on financial matters. Each new policy requires a heavy financial involvement which in the ultimate analysis has to be borne by the poor people of the country. Most interestingly, rather than facing any opposition, attempt which rejects an earlier system and proposes to introduce a new one appears to find favourable response, particularly from the vested groups and political touts. When the politicians initiate a new approach, they need a support base at the local level. The local elites tend to join new positions in the new system irrespective of its quality and suitability and thereby contribute to the by-passing of the cause of rural development in real terms.

61. Atiur Rahman, "Rural Power Structure : A Study of Union Parishad Leaders in Bangladesh" *The Journal of Social Studies*, No. 4, July 1979, pp. 104-110.

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