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THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

I

AIMS OF HEINRICH BÖLL FOUNDATION

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a national foundation, which is affiliated to the Green Party in Germany "Bündniss 90/Die Grünen". The foundation's foremost task is political education in Germany and in 60 countries abroad with the aim of promoting informed democratic opinion, socio-political commitment and mutual understanding. However, it does not interfere in the party politics of the respective partner countries. In addition, the foundation supports artistic and cultural as well as scholarly projects, and co-operation in the development field. The political values of ecology, democracy, solidarity and non-violence are our chief points of reference.

Thus, the Heinrich Böll Foundation is not specifically active in the field of technical or financial co-operation, which is represented here by GTZ and KfW. However, the activities of Heinrich Böll Foundation contribute to the development
process and to poverty alleviation by strengthening civil society institutions and promoting political participation.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is based in Berlin and has approximately 140 staff members in Germany and abroad. The activities abroad are supported by 13 regional offices. The office in charge of the activities in South Asia is located in Lahore, Pakistan. The projects abroad are funded by the Ministry of Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ).

II

THEMES

The main themes of the work of Heinrich Böll Foundation in Asia are:

1. **Women empowerment and gender democracy:** This theme takes account of the legal and social discrimination against women in almost all Asian societies despite their great heterogeneity. The Heinrich Böll Foundation supports educational projects for nuns in Cambodia and in the Tibetan exile community in India, programmes for legal and political education and awareness raising for women in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand. Moreover, Heinrich Böll Foundation supports projects in the field of media and against trafficking women in the Philippines and in Thailand.

2. **Ecology and sustainability:** These are main topics of the green movement in Germany. In Thailand Heinrich Böll Foundation co-operates with the ecological movements in their approach to raise ecological awareness among
farmers and consumers and to run educational programmes in these fields.

3. **Culture and development:** This is a traditional theme of Heinrich Böll Foundation. It is based on the understanding that in Asian societies, their religion, tradition and culture have to be taken into account for implementing culturally sustainable development approaches. Religion and culture have a very deep meaning for the people and can become the basis for change in the societies. Globalisation takes place not only in economic terms but influences the cultural behaviour, the values and the consumer behaviour as well. The Heinrich Böll Foundation contributes to the protection and revitalisation of the traditional values of the Asian societies in order to support integrative patterns of development. Heinrich Böll Foundation co-operates with various cultural and religious institutions from what committees in Cambodia and the exile community of Tibetans to theatre groups in India and Bangladesh.

4. **Global governance:** Heinrich Böll Foundation promotes NGOs working at the national as well as the international level on global themes like climate change or regulations concerning bio-diversity in order to give them a chance to influence negotiations on the international level.

II

**THE APPROACH OF WORK IN BANGLADESH**

The current situation in Bangladesh is still characterised by the limited access of women to education, health and
medical facilities. A lack of awareness of rights, laws and policies relating to women and limited income opportunities due to discrimination especially through the purdah (segregation) system prevents women from equally participating in the development process.

- The problems of political participation of women is to be seen in the under-representation of women in decision making bodies: out of the 330 seats in parliament only 30 seats are reserved for women and in the elections of 1996 only 7 women captured a regular seat.

- The legal situation for women is still discriminatory due to male dominated power structures especially in rural areas and to problems with the implementation of laws in favour of women.

- There is a lack of political awareness and knowledge among the population and discrimination of minorities and poor.

- All over South Asia and also in Bangladesh we see a rise of fundamentalism and violence especially violence against women

Based on this analysis Heinrich Böll Foundation works on the following themes in Bangladesh:

1. High importance is laid on political participation and empowerment for economic development and poverty reduction. Economic development must be combined with political participation in order to secure a sustainable process. In this regard, the participation of civil society is
2. Therefore, we co-operate closely with NGOs and local experts in implementing our projects. This is not a problem of lacking resources but represents a principle of our work. By co-operating with already existing institutions of the civil society Heinrich Böll Foundation uses local knowledge and structures as well as the existing access of NGOs to the target groups.

3. The main objective of our work is to empower women economically, politically and socially through institution building, awareness raising and mobilisation. Since the economic condition of women is very poor, an approach was developed with one of the partner organisations of the Heinrich Böll Foundation to combine economic support in the form of credit programmes and training for income generation with political education. Thus, we follow an integrated approach i.e. credit is used as a means of supporting but also of organising women groups. Political education programmes are aimed at raising the political awareness of women and encouraging them to participate in the political life of the country. The encouragement of women to actively participate or even contest in the local elections in December 1997 is a striking example.

4. Culture is an important way to reach the people and can be used for political education and changes in the society. Music and theatre have a very long tradition in Bangladesh and were used to convey cultural values and information. Since the continuation of this tradition is threatened by the
impoverishment especially of rural communities and by the influence of fundamentalist groups, Heinrich Böll Foundation supports the work of theatre groups, which are working to revive these traditions and use the folk theatre as a means of education and political awareness raising.

5. Grassroots initiatives have to be linked with interventions on the political level. The Heinrich Böll Foundation made the experience that grassroots work in the above mentioned fields is very important to change the life of the people. However, a link to the level of decision making is required to change laws and policies affecting the life of the people. Thus, the projects of Heinrich Böll Foundation aim at influencing political decision making on all levels and by different approaches using the experience of the work in the communities. Under the projects, seminars and rallies are organised and publications, posters and leaflets produced. Our project partners co-operate with government bodies in the formulation of policies and laws. By the latter the organisations bring in their specific knowledge and influence the decision making from the point of view of the civil society.

III

NEW OBJECTIVES FOR WORK IN SOUTH ASIA

Due to the changed political situation in South Asia, which can be described by rising violence within the societies and especially between India and Pakistan, Heinrich Böll Foundation is currently reviewing the South Asia programme
and will add new issues, which will affect our work in Bangladesh as well. The new issues will be:

1. Conflict prevention: supporting the Peace Movement and the anti-nuclear movement with a special focus on India-Pakistan but also throughout the region;

2. Supporting and, where possible, strengthening networking and co-operation among civil society institutions in the region;

3. Gender Democracy and co-operation with our partners to counter the influence of religious "Fundamentalism";

4. Last but not least, support in building and strengthening the regional alliance SAARC into a strong economic and political union. A co-operation with SAARC in workshops and seminars may slowly help it to play a more political role.

IV

THE WORK OF OUR PARTNER ORGANISATIONS IN BANGLADESH

Finally the work of our two partner organisations in Bangladesh is presented:

1. Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)

BNPS is a women's organisation. Its vision is to establish a society, which is free from all sorts of discrimination against
women and where women enjoy equal rights and status in all spheres of life in the society and the state.

The project "Economic and political empowerment of women" aims at:

- Strengthening of self-help groups in rural areas by means of an integrated development of women and poverty-decreasing measures, leading to structural improvements in their village communities;

- Promotion of vocational, management and organisational training programme for women to strengthen their capacity to understand their situation, act locally and work together towards meeting their needs as participants in development;

- Empowerment of women living in rural and urban Bangladesh to improve their socio-economic situation through small-scale income generation activities and the usage of revolving funds;

- Promotion of entrepreneurial engagement and higher self-confidence of women in relevant areas of society;

- Increasing the general awareness of women issues among the political parties and introducing women issues into policy making and development of the legal system;

- Creating an enabling environment in the society for participation of women in the decision making process from family to state; and

- Creating broader space for women in the mainstream of the society so that they can influence policy makers in favour of a policy environment suitable for women.
2. Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA)

The Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts is a non-governmental organisation, working in Chittagong with the aim to improve the living situation of underprivileged children, women and men in the Chittagong area by using cultural forms for awareness raising. The main objective of the project is the promotion and the development of traditional forms of conveying political education and mobilisation in villages and slum areas of the Chittagong region.

The project aims at:

- Promotion of democratic values and civil intervention i.e. activities to represent political interests of the target groups;
- Preservation and revitalisation of typical form of folk theatre;
- Integration of themes like ecology, gender, legal situation of women and poverty reduction into the traditional form of theatre work;
- Training and promotion of artists and authors for the development related side of theatre work;
- Strengthening of the organisational and managerial capacities of BITA itself through training and counselling;
- Development of BITA's potential to work as a Theatre Training Institute.

Both projects have been evaluated by independent consultants, who gave a very positive assessment of the results achieved so far. The recommendations have been
used for future programme planning and both projects have been extended up to the end 2001 and 2000 respectively. Based on the good results of our work in Bangladesh so far, Heinrich Böll Foundation is going to continue its co-operation with Non Governmental Organisations in the future.