

A Study on Integrated National Action for Rural Children

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a) Researcher's Identity

1. M. Nurul Haq
Director, RDA, Bogra
M.A. (Economics), Dhaka University
M.S. (Development Administration), American University, Beirut

b) Objectives

- i. To study the health, nutritional status and education of the children in Bangladesh;
- ii. To identify the reason for children's malnutrition; and
- iii. To give some recommendation to improve the socio-economic condition of children.

c) Executive summary

In the design a methodology was suggested which included quick field survey, study of documents from various agencies including UN agencies and statistical data from secondary sources. Accordingly attempts were made to follow the methodology as far as possible. Besides conducting quick surveys in the purposely selected villages, frantic efforts were made to collect data from various agencies including Thana Health Complex, UN agencies, non-government organizations and other relevant institutions. It is disappointing to find out that data on rural children is virtually non-existent and whatever is available from a few hospitals and health complexes are scanty and scattered which do not lend sufficient support for any serious study on Rural Children in Bangladesh¹.

Nevertheless we have to consolidate and collate all available information to arrive at a broad understanding about the present situation of the children under 15 years of age in rural Bangladesh. In preparing the present study there was a heavy dependence on an earlier study made by Foundation for

1. *In any Thana Complex there are attempts for collection of some statistics. These are the cases that are recorded in their registers which include such items as number of night blindness and number of DPT cases.*

Research on Education Planning and Development and most of the data have been derived from that source. Survey data collected from Bogra Mission Hospital added a great value for the study. Among the other sources of data collection was; the Institute of food and Nutrition, Bangladesh Statistics Bureau, UNICEF, Dacca, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh deserves special mention.

There are some non-government innovative projects such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Gana Saistya Kendra (People's Health Centre) who are playing a significant role in developing a method of reaching the unreached rural children of Bangladesh with supplies and services. Attempts have been made to highlight their contributions for the rural children in this study.

In short the study will focus on demographic profile, health and nutrition status, education and socio-economic conditions of the rural children of Bangladesh.

In summing up the situation of children from the scanty evidences cited above the following major points are emerged:

1. Bangladesh population will reach 108 million by the turn of this decade and assuming a declining population growth rate the children under 15 years of age will be around 41 million.
2. According to survey carried out by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in rural Bangladesh in 1973-74 79% of the children came from families below the poverty level.
3. Bangladesh children suffer from malnutrition. The second and the third degree malnutrition affect an estimated 10% and first degree malnutrition another 40% of the children of Bangladesh. Malnutrition among pre-school children has led to protein-energy malnutrition, growth retardation and high child mortality. Bangladesh children also suffer from vitamin "A" deficiency related malnutrition and a high incidence of anemia among children under five years of age.
4. General health status of particularly the children of poorer family is very poor. Most children suffer from various types of communicable diseases. In cases where deaths are not high morbidity rates are quite high. Most common diseases are diarrhea, dysentery, respiratory diseases, measles and tetanus.

5. Because the majority of children are from poorer section of the rural society, the clientele for welfare services are very large. Where the family fails to take care of the children, welfare measures are not sufficient to protect the children from infant mortality and other dangers. However, a few welfare agencies are providing valuable services to the children of Bangladesh. These orphanages are now called (Shishu Sadan) Rural Social Services, care protection centre, schools for blind, deaf and dumb and Urban Community development Projects of Social Welfare Department of Government of Bangladesh. In addition, there are a large number of voluntary agencies such as Save the Children, World Vision Concern etc. who are engaged in children welfare activities.
6. Education: Educational facilities are now available utterly inadequate to meet the need of the country's growing children population. Pre-primary level education in an organized way in rural areas of Bangladesh is virtually non-existent. In the good old days there were a few well motivated educated persons present in rural areas who would consider it a virtue to engage themselves in educating the children of the village at a nominal annual fee. These were private initiatives which are now a far cry. Primary education has now been taken up by the government but the facilities of sitting arrangement, toilet facilities and play ground are inadequate. In a survey by the Institute of Education and Research, Dhaka University, most of the primary schools were found to be lack in provisions like, furniture , appliances, play ground, reading materials, equipments (chalkboard, maps, charts, globe) health services, drinking water facilities and toilet facilities. Even then only about 60% of the children are fortunate to enter into primary school and remaining 40% never have the chance to go to schools. Of the children who are in primary schools, 70% of them got dropped before they complete 5 years of education. Hence there is a large wastage in terms of school dropouts.

In order to improve the situation of children, the Integrated National Action for Children Development in Bangladesh should aim at;

- (i) Filling up of nutrition gap i.e. supply of caloric, protein, iron and vitamin for all children.
- (ii) Adequate Health care for all in order to prevent diseases and deaths.
- (iii) Universal Primary Education to wipe out illiteracy and ignorance.

How to do that? The answer has been provided by the UNICEF Chief of Bangladesh when he said:

What required is a child oriented approach in every field of national education. In this way the nation can create the best conditions for the improvement of the well-being of children and ultimately the society as a whole. This means in short placing the needs of the children at the centre, the heart of the national development effort. How can this be done? The answer was given by His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. His Royal Highness suggested that for every programmed activity considered the following questions be raised:

- What contribution will this activity make to the reduction of infant mortality in Bangladesh?
- What contribution will this activity make to the reduction of mortality among the children between 1 and 5 years of age?
- What contribution will this activity make to prepare a generation of physically and mentally healthy children?
- What contribution will this activity make to provide adequate education to the children of Bangladesh?
- What contribution will this activity make to extend the basic services for mothers and families?

All these questions suggest that a strategy should be found which will help in building up of self reliance in the rural communities. The children are basically the responsibility of the parents and the communities. Unless parents and communities are made self reliant no other efforts will have sustained effect for the improvement of the lot of the millions of rural children. All activities must be directed towards making the parent and the communities self reliant as far as practicable.

There are ways to achieve that goal. Such a strategy should be based on developing village-level workers who are more likely to be knowledgeable about the communities' skills and resources in tone with community's needs and sensitive to the community's belief and values. Having spotted the strategy it can be appropriate to narrate some of the experiences in developing the village institutions which can be effectively utilized to develop an integrated action for children development. These institutions are:

- i) Family
- ii) Village Co-operatives
- iii) Village Governments
- iv) Village Mosques
- v) Village School

Role of family in Child Development

The family is the foundation and fountain of life and sustenance of a child in Bangladesh. Child depends on the family resources from the very beginning of his life. His first dependence is with his parents, especially with the mother. The needs of the child can not be seen in isolation from those of the family and the community. The beginning of life of a child is in the womb of the mother. At the stage the child depends on life support systems of the mother. The socio-economic and cultural complexes of the mother will decide whether the child will get sufficient and sustained supplies of sustenance of life in the womb. Birth of the child will not substantially change the situation and same kind of dependence on the mother will continue until the weaning stage. As the child grows older he/she gradually gets out from the arms of the mother. Dependence of the child starts shifting from the mother to the father and the family through family to the community.

In Bangladesh it is difficult to reach a child without reaching the mother and the mother without reaching the father. Sometimes it is difficult to get his consent and convince him of the benefits of a child development programme. At times it becomes necessary to discuss matters with the community leaders and patrons of the parents of the children. Even if it is possible to reach the child with supplies and services of child development programmes, then it remains to be decided with what to reach. What are the needs? Such as nutrition, food, shelter, medical care, clean cloth, safe water, education and what not? May be rural children in Bangladesh need most of the items mentioned and for this reason an integrated approach would be necessary.

The family is still the unit of production and family system is strongly based on sympathy for the children and old people. The family must take the responsibilities to meet the basic needs of the children. For better off families there is no problem. They do it without being prompted by anybody and also without any outside help. Sometimes even they overdo to certain extent and spoil the child with too much too soon.

But the real problem lies with the children of disadvantaged family, the deficit families, unemployed families, widowed families, and orphaned families.

In developing a programme for the rural children of Bangladesh everybody seems to agree that the community involvement must be stimulated, that cost must be kept down and that an integrated approach must be pursued. But nobody as yet really knows how to accomplish this. There can be some

suggestions on the basis of some experiences gathered in the field. It will need investment. Nothing can be achieved on a shoe string. It is admitted there is a widespread poverty in the villages. A large number of people are landless, jobless and hopeless.

What can be done under the present circumstances is to restore determination in place of desperation, to bring solace in place of sadness, to inculcate purposefulness in place of passivism. Some success was achieved through a women's programme in a few villages of Bogra.

About five years ago two villages were selected for playing with same basic concept of reaching the poorest of the poor women with development programmes such as organising them into groups for discussions and planning, economic activities which they are familiar with injecting the idea of thrift and savings, teaching use of credit facilities and propagating ill effects of having too many children. It was not easy to reach them directly. Many of them were maid-servants with better off families. Some of them were trapped in poverty because of large size families including their own sick sons and daughters. Others were anemic themselves. Elite of the village was identified through some references in one of the village studies done in the forties of this century. Once upon a time this family was one of the big landlord in the area. He was persuaded to provide leadership and take some responsibilities of overseeing the activities of the members of the group. He was especially requested to exert his influence if the members break the norms of group behavior. His wife was duly elected as the chair woman of the group. This was the beginning. But the members of the group needed a sustained effort for holding meetings, discussing matters related to their economic problems and finding out ways of solving those problems. One way according to their suggestion was to make a start with whatever they had in terms of skill and capital. Capital was very small and was a real problem. There was no body that is willing to loan money to them nor were they willing to borrow from the bank. They heard so many stories about bank loan and losing property in order to make repayment. Some attempts were made to advance money at free of interest from some funds. This was acceptable only to a few. They were the pioneers. They showed the way to others how to borrow, how to use borrowed money for productive purposes, how to earn extra income and repay timely. This process continued for several years and gradually many other members got interested in borrowing capital for different kinds of trade with which they were familiar. Need was felt strongly. Suggestions were made for taking loan from the bank with interest. Many of the members agreed. A linkage with one of the commercial bank was established. Production plans were prepared and submitted to the bank. The bank examined those plans carefully before approving and finally

advanced credit without collateral at concessionary rate of interest on request from the project. Things started moving with ups and downs, facing problems and solving them through mutual discussions, persuasions and motivations.

Now the groups are ready for listening to suggestions about children health, child care, nutrition and education. They also talk about accepting family planning measures, a new environment has been created and a new stage has been set for systematic programme building as they feel it necessary. They are now a disciplined audience, a disciplined group, an effective receiving mechanism which any delivery mechanism can reach and utilize.

Special failure of this women's programme is that it specifically addressed to women; those women who are really poor and on the verge of destitution and, those who have families to look after. Some of them have husbands who are sick, unemployed, exhausted their paternal and personal properties and have become as social liabilities.

The structure of the group is informal and simple. Rules are mostly well established norms and conventions. Records are as simple as it could be managed by the half educated village women. There is no super structure above the village groups. Members are directly linked with group and the managing committee members. They also directly deal with the bank for depositing savings and disbursement and realization of the loans. Cost of operation is minimum. Members of the groups are grateful to the project personnel who showed them the way for earning income and becoming independent of money lenders and village power structure.

With the increase in income of the family the children were better, wear better clothes and look more live. Parents are sending them to schools. The children of the poor are now equal members of the play groups and school mates.

It would be naive to think that the world has changed for them and every problem has been solved. Still many children are suffering from malnutrition, anaemia, blown up bellies, running nose, visible ribs, infected skins and infested worms. Many of them do not have access to clean water, proper medical care and pre school education facilities. Problems are thousand and one difficulties are formidable but a beginning could be made with nutrition education through showing slides, arranging discussions with the members of the groups which they will certainly appreciate and likely to offer proper response.

There has to be an institutional approach in order to expect participation from the members of the family of the poorer section of the village population. Meeting place of the members of the group could be converted into a centre for demonstration of nutritious food prepared by the local resources such as vegetable pulses and a mixture of other ingredients. As stated above, the stage is set for any drama to be played on.

Role of Cooperative in meeting the Basic Needs of the mothers and children:

Poor children come from poor parents. The poor parents are trapped in poverty. Poverty forces them to less food, less nutrition, less energy, less production, less income, again less food and nutrition, poor health, poor medical facilities, poor sanitation, and a living in vicious circle of poverty trap.

Unless there is a way out or a means to break the vicious circle things will move on from bad to worse. An under-nourished worker naturally lacks the stamina to sustain the physical effort necessary to work for maximum productive. One can also hardly expect a field labourer to perform his task with great efficiency while he is worried about feeding his wife and children with a very low wage rate offered to him for a days work.

There are not many instances in this country where such a vicious circle has been broken and vast majority of landless labourers has been relieved from their poverty trap. Nevertheless, there are a few illustrious examples such as the case of "Deader Society" in Comilla. About twenty years ago a band of nine landless three-wheeled cycle-pullers joined together at the persuasion of a tea-shop where they used to stop and rest for a cup of tea. They were advised to take one cup of tea less in a day and save the price of a cup of tea daily. This simple advice produced a result which is unbelievable today. The membership of the group has increased from nine to nine hundred and the capital from nine annas (a little over one half a taka) to nine hundred takes. There are benefits to the children; there are benefits to mothers and other male members. It is now possible the most successful cooperative venture in the country. The key to success is discipline and observance of the basic principles of cooperation, innovative plans and programmes and whole hearted support of the membership. All those are helped by the existence of undisputed dynamic leadership of the manager of the society. The society has been offering benefits to the members and the members are offering unwavering supports to the society, mutually supportive and reinforcing. The children are supplied with books, school fees, scholarship, medical care, and prizes from the society. The parents receipt profits and other patronages

which are ploughed back for better care of the children. This is the best way to solve the problem of malnutrition, ill-health and illiteracy of the millions of children of Bangladesh.

Role of local governance bodies in meeting the needs of the rural children:

For centuries, local governance bodies have a role to play in providing basic amenities to ensure health and hygiene of the people of rural areas. In the good old days they had the responsibilities of providing drinking water, relief to the helpless and the poor and assistance to the women and children, construction of bunds and dams for irrigation. Over the years the functions of the local bodies have gone through some changes but the basic character of their functions remained more or less the same.

Nowadays Swanirvar Gram Sarker, Union Parishads and Zilla Parishads are entrusted with development functions and social services functions. What is needed to improve the effectiveness of these institutions in the field of children welfare is sufficient allocation of resources for its normal activities which are designed to create better physical infrastructure such as road, canal bridges, sanitary facilities, safe drinking water, dispensaries, health clinic and maternity centre. Though primarily, all these activities will create more opportunities for employment of landless people which will raise their income for looking after their own wards and children, at the same time other social services will improve the general conditions of the rural areas. Some estimate suggests that in order to save young children from various health hazards and to provide adequate nutrition and reasonable facilities and opportunities for education at least an amount of Tk. 2.000 per child per year would be necessary. In other words a substantial investment is necessary for meeting basic needs of the children through implementation of programmes under the sponsorship of the local bodies.

Providing Agricultural Credit to Small Farmers:

In order to improve the economic conditions of small farmers, whose number is fastly increasing in Bangladesh, the role of agricultural credit is very crucial. Farm credit is usually a necessary input for increasing production especially for those small farmers who have no capital or access to institutional sources of credit. There is considerable scope to encourage small farmers to raise their output and earn a better income from agriculture. An informal cooperative under which the members are held separately and severally responsible for repayment of the loan has the best prospect of success provided the members realize the benefit of group responsibility for individual borrowing and remain prompt in timely repayment of loan. One study indicates that the rate of interest is not a serious concern of the

borrowers but the regularity in the availability of timely loan is the most important. When the loan is timely available it leads to increase the income and better care for the children.

Role of Mosque in meeting the education need of the school dropout children:

In the present study we have seen that a large number of children nearly 40% never enter primary schools and those who enter nearly 70% of them leave primary schools before completing 5 years of schooling. Hence, there is a growing number of illiterate populations in the country. The government has been trying in many ways to get rid of the curse of the illiteracy but the success up till now has been very limited. In the famous Comilla Project in years ago an attempt was made to use the famous (prayer leader of the mosque) as the teachers for the children and the mosques as the centre for pre school education. The Imams are already trained in Arabic and little more training in methodology in handling vernacular and arithmetic as additional subjects to Arabic teaching can combine secular education with religious education to a very large number of boys and girls in the rural Bangladesh. This can be supplemented by running primary schools on shift basis as more vigorous attempt on non-formal education through various programmes. Voluntary efforts by educated section of people would also go a long way in eradicating illiteracy.

In the present study it was pointed out that malnutrition and lack of access to education facilities for the vast majority of the rural children are two most serious curses which the nation must try to get rid of as quickly as possible. The high mortality and morbidity of infants and young children are ascribed to malnutrition. It is also causing irreparable damage to the physical and mental health of large segment of our population. Good nutritional status of the population is essential for providing a basis to promote economic growth and overall development of a nation.