

045 Rural Development in Bangladesh: An Inter-Country Comparative Analysis in SAARC Member Countries

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a) Researcher's Identity:

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b) Objectives

The specific objectives of the study can be summarized as follows:

- i. To present an overview of rural development policies and approaches followed in Bangladesh since 1950s and to identify the gaps and shortfalls therein;
- ii. To examine the problems faced in the implementation of those programmes and assess the need and scope for people's participation in the development process;
- iii. To examine the efficacy of administrative structure and machinery for implementation of rural development programmes; and
- iv. To make a critical review of the impact of rural development programmes on the socio-economic life of the rural people.

c) Executive summary

The concept of rural development means different things to different experts. We however can agree with the broad objectives of rural development as enunciated in the Second Five Year Plan of Bangladesh. "The aim of rural development is to improve the quality of life of the people in terms of accelerated agricultural production, rapid generation of income and employment, improvement of human resources, reduction of inequality and poverty. For this more sectoral or project approach dealing with single aspects of rural development is not adequate to bring about overall socio-economic development of rural areas".

Even if we agree with the broad goals of rural development, there would be divergence of views as how these goals could be achieved. There is however

no denying of the fact that the incidence of mass poverty and unemployment is an extremely serious but complex problem in all countries of the SAARC region. Despite planned development efforts, the number of rural poor has continued to grow in absolute terms. The problem of rural poverty is intimately connected with landlessness, unemployment and low productivity. Thus, any reduction of mass poverty and unemployment would require more effective strategy and realistic policy in order to generate productive employment opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed and, eliminate social and economic constraints which impede the rural poor from raising their productivity and incomes.

Like most other developing countries, all the SAARC countries have a long history of rural development which was based on the realization that their overall economic as well as national development largely depend on the formulation and implementation of effective policies to deal with the problems of the rural areas where the overwhelming majority of the population live in. This requires developing suitable strategies related to rural development. Many of the problems which these countries are facing today are to some extent, the outcomes of colonial subjugation for a long period. These problems have been further accentuated due to the neglect of the rural sector in development plans.

Except for the regional variations, the nature and magnitude of the major problems faced by these countries are almost similar. The problems can be listed as; poverty, unemployment, low productivity, hunger, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy and over population. Different programmes and experiments are going on to deal with these problems. Some of the programmes have achieved considerable success. But still there is wide consensus that the success so far achieved in improving the condition of the rural people has not been upto the expectation. Some experts believe that perhaps there is something basically wrong in the approaches to rural development now being implemented in these countries.

In view of these limitations, it has been felt that the member countries of the SAARC should have a reliable common reference basis in the field of rural development. This would hopefully serve as guidelines for the formulation and the modification of rural development policies. In order to provide such a basic reference material and to sustain increasing collaboration among the SAARC countries in the field of rural development the need for a study can not be overemphasized. Moreover, it is expected that such a study would facilitate exchange views and experiences in the field of rural development to the benefit of all member countries. Since there is no single prescription (or model) for the solution of the problems of mass poverty and rural

development, such exchange of views and experiences of the countries would help in finding solution to some of the common problems and issues.

Keeping in view of these needs, the SAARC Technical Committee on Rural Development (TCRD) in its third meeting recommended a study on "Rural Development in South Asia ; An Intercountry Comparative Analysis". The present study represents case study of Bangladesh in the field of Rural Development.

d) Conclusions and Recommendations

The history of rural development in Bangladesh can be traced back to as early as the later part of the eighteenth century during the British colonial rule. Since the partition of the country in 1947 rural development started getting special significance as a major development strategy. The V-AID of 50s, the Comilla Approach of 60s, the Swanirvar Gram Sarker Movement of 70s the Decentralized Upazila System of 80s all reflect a continuing and deep preoccupation of the successive regimes with what can be termed as rural development. But the achievement until now has not been anything spectacular.

Notwithstanding the absence of any remarkable unanimity about the programme components that can achieve rapid rural development, there is now an increasing realization that the strategy of development so long pursued in the country have not brought about significant changes in per capita income, employment, productivity or other widely known indices of socio-economic development for the overwhelming majority of the population. The present state of affairs with 80% of the people living below poverty line, 33% of the labour force being un-employed, 90% of farmers being small and poor, over 50% households owning less than 0.5 acre to no land at all represents a far worsening situation than that was obtaining 20 years back. The meagre agricultural development that took place because of the introduction of seed fertilizer-irrigation technology benefited the large and medium scale farmers and land owners who form the core of the village power elite. This has created a dualistic economy where unemployment, underemployment, landlessness have gone from bad to worse. The rich farmers have become not only richer in the process but also more oppressive and exploitative. The country is still ranked as one of the poorest.

For the lack of a stable political framework, it has not yet been possible to evolve a strong theoretical base for development planning. As a result, the development programmes have been suffering very much from the lack of

consistency and continuity. There had been constant shift in the development strategies which often disturbed the long term development process. During the last few decades whenever a new government came to power it started new programmes in the name of rural development and finally used it to achieve political gains. In this game, the country witnessed different rural development programme of almost every conceivable nature but the lot of the common people did not change much, rather their conditions had deteriorated in many respects. This still remains the principal dilemma of development planning in Bangladesh. What is, therefore, needed is a theory of rural development to guide the planners and policymakers of the country, a theory which can operate beyond political compulsion, and can give a framework to operate on a fairly long time horizon and can lead to structural change.

For effective planning and implementation of rural development programmes, the need for popular participation has been emphasized in almost all the plans of the country. But until now no effective mechanism could be spelled out to realize this objective. Although the tradition of the local government in Bangladesh extends over one hundred years, there is still an absence of consistency in their pattern and functioning. Functionally as well as structurally, a number of mutually inconsistent patterns are operating in the country. At the same time, search for experimentation with novel pattern is also going on. No national consensus has yet emerged. The local government as a national sub-system is yet to be settled down. What still remains basically is an offshoot of colonial and federal tradition which has to be boldly restructured in consistent with the overall governmental superstructure and a unitary state as well as to the requirement of an independent and developing country.

Although no one would argue against the theoretical aspect of the newly introduced Upazila system, the ultimate aim of which is declared to be the amelioration of the lots of the people through basic changes, the immediate problems and future issues to be encountered and faced in the process of implementation of the whole system can hardly be ruled out. What is first needed therefore is to sustain the newly introduced system and carry forward it to evolve a democratic political system at the national level. Such a process has just been retarded due to political uncertainties. Much depends on the nature and character of the future democratic governments that would come to power to govern the country, their commitment, philosophy, vision and ideology.

Rural development in Bangladesh can not be successful unless the rural poor are properly organized to safeguard their own interests. As regards the organization of the rural poor there are still many gray areas. There are for instance, the questions of whether each category of the rural poor such as cultivators, artisans, day labourers and women should have separate organization or should all categories be organized into a common organization what should be the viable size of a group. With the poor being illiterate and lack in organizational skill, what should be the effective mechanism to initiate organization among them? Once the poor are organized, then keeping the different interest groups together, managing the organization and finding leaders pose a serious problem. All these issues are yet to be resolved.

There seems to be a general consensus that in order to help the rural poor, there should be an effective service delivery system. But as we have already found the majority of the rural poor in Bangladesh have neither access to material resources nor have base of non-materials resources for earning livelihoods. Thus any intervention from the government machinery to break the inertia or to provide access to inputs falls in the hands of the power structure. Under such a situation, no programme for rural development can lead to the improvement of the condition of the masses; rather it may increase their dependency on the government and the bureaucracy.

Rural development requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. The integrated rural development model evolved in Comilla and has been implemented in the country through BRDB as a national programme has not incorporated all four components of the model. The emphasis still remains primarily on crop production and that too has not been duly supported by appropriate programmes for marketing, processing and storing. The surplus generated from increased incomes from agriculture has not been pooled to build industries. While RWP and intensive agriculture generated some employment, beyond that there was hardly any organized effort to create more employment opportunities. The programmes for education, health, housing and family planning did not receive adequate attention. With regard to comprehensive coverage of the population of different age, occupation and sex groups it could do very little. Even half of the total households in the village have not been brought under its organizational fold. There were not enough activities or programmes for the landless, the women, the youth and the children. The rural co-operatives organized under BRDB could not serve as an effective instrument in the struggle against rural poverty. The co-operatives, which absorb an unproportionately large share of the subsidies going to agriculture, work mainly for the benefit of a small majority of surplus farmers, while the participation of the landless or near-landless has

been very marginal. If assessed in terms of economic growth, social justice and self-reliance, the present cooperative structure is not compatible with any of these goals.

With respect to the Grameen Bank which has achieved some encouraging results, there are indications that credit alone can not improve the conditions of the rural poor. Wide proliferation of different non-farm activities undertaken by the members of the Grameen Bank, there seems to be definite limitation to such activities that can be undertaken in rural areas. There are evidences that returns from loan are already beginning to diminish.

In a poor country like Bangladesh which is faced with a serious resources constraint, the rapid population growth is a big impediment to development. There are about 100 million people living in an area of 144 thousand square kilometer. The man-land ratio being 0.38 acre is causing heavy pressure on land. About 40% of the total available labour time is estimated to be unemployed. Every year another 0.75 million people are joining the labour force. About 50% of the total population is estimated to be below 15 years showing the high dependency ratio. If the present rate of population growth (of about 2.5%) continues, the situation is bound to deteriorate further. During the last few decades, a number of programmes have been taken up in the country, both by the government and non-government agencies to promote population control and family welfare activities but upto now the results are not very encouraging.

With the present rate of literacy (about 25%), which is one of the lowest in the world, it is very difficult to involve the people to participate meaningfully in any development programme. Besides, with respect to the present education system, it can be questioned whether it helps or harms the rural communities. The contents of the course at all levels of schooling are considered largely irrelevant to the needs of the villages. On the contrary, these cause a brain drain from rural to urban areas. Many rural people spend a large part of their hard-earned money for giving education to their children in towns, but benefits from this investment in human capital seldom go to the villages.

Rural development in Bangladesh primarily means building up infrastructure and supply of credits and inputs for increased production, more employment and higher income. All these need huge capital. As the country suffers from serious resource constraint, it has to depend on external aid. There is no doubt that the foreign economic assistance has helped Bangladesh to overcome different crises. The rehabilitation of the economy after the war of liberation would have been impossible without the aid that was provided. But

the review of the aid-utilization shows not only under-utilization of most of the physical facilities built with huge investment, but at times, total misuse of such facilities.

As regards the effect of aid on the rate of growth, domestic savings are estimated to amount to no more than some 3% per year, which clearly implies a negative rate of growth of GDP in the absence of external assistance. The prospects for economic growth in Bangladesh thus seem to be intimately related to the future size of foreign aid, which would have to be about 10% of GDP in order to achieve the one percent growth rate.

It has been observed that unrestricted and open door aid policy in Bangladesh leads to irrational application of aid and creates dependency relationship leading to distortions in the national economy. Moreover, the restrictions imposed by many donors on the use of the aid contribute for making the true value of aid fall far below the nominal figures. The most serious factor reducing the positive impact of aid on the rate of growth is the fact that aid sometimes replaces rather than supplements the domestic efforts to mobilize internal resources.

Rural Development experience in Bangladesh reveals that various efforts made so far in this country could not bring about much qualitative change in the life of the rural poor. Instead, as an outcome of these efforts, a polarized dualism is taking place in the rural society, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. There has been a feeling that there is something wrong somewhere in the approach to rural development pursued so long. There is still much soul searching to find out a viable model of rural development for the country. Against the background of past experiences of rural development in Bangladesh, the following points can be put forward for careful thinking for formulation of future rural development policies:

1. The problems of the rural areas in Bangladesh are diversified and deep rooted which have been accumulated over a period of time. Without strong commitments and sustained efforts it is difficult to handle these problems meaningfully. This needs not only continuity and consistency in the government policies but also a strong theoretical base which could operate beyond political compulsion on a long term horizon.
2. A key element in the process of rural development in Bangladesh is the rural power structure dominated by relatively big farmers and powerful elites who form a vicious circle in collaboration with the government machinery. Without rational distribution and control of material wealth, particularly of land it is not possible to break this vicious circle. If

through rural development any structural transformation of the rural economy is to bring in Bangladesh land reform should form an integral part of the rural development policy of the country.

3. Without people's participation in decision making, no rural development can be successful. In the existing local government institutions in Bangladesh there is very little scope for meaningful participation of the people in identification, planning and implementation of development programmes. In order to facilitate people's participation in local level institutions have to be made more representative. Under the existing primary cooperative of BRDB a number of functional groups can be formed according to the need and interest of the people. To enable the members to participate in wide range of development activities the scope of the cooperative can be broad based. The village cooperative should have representative at the Union Parishad with proper authority to participate in all development activities at local level. There should also be programme for rousing consciousness of the people, so that they can safeguard their own interests.
4. For successful implementation of rural development programmes there is need for collaboration and coordination among different departments and agencies. This is very much lacking in Bangladesh. The departmental officers are always keen to maintain separate identity their programmes and functional responsibilities. As such the compartmental approach in planning still predominates the scene. It can not be physically possible to administratively integrate all the components of comprehensive rural development but some mechanism has to be evolved to make necessary services simultaneously available. In order to ensure simultaneity and proper sequential development of the various components of comprehensive rural development, suitable local level planning and coordination are essential. Such planning and coordination can be better performed by local institutions. It is, therefore, proposed that the local government institutions from district to village levels should be developed in this direction. These institutions will establish both horizontal linkages at the local level and vertical linkages between the tiers of local government. It is only through such linkages; provision of the components of comprehensive rural development can be ensured in due course.
5. Other than administrative and political support the successful implementation of rural development programmes depends on the availability of resources. For shortage of domestic resources in rural development in Bangladesh is very much linked up with aid issue. It has been observed that the restrictions imposed by the donors on the use of

aid not only restricted the sectoral allocation of programmes but also interfered the independent development policies of the country. Besides, foreign aid also has a political role to support the government to remain in power. The ruling class always had a tendency to use the funds for those programmes which served their political interests rather than the actual needs of the country. If this trend continues the fate of the rural development in Bangladesh will continue to hang in balance.

6. In an agrarian economy like Bangladesh, priority for agricultural development must remain and development of physical infrastructures like communication, drainage, markets and storage will be required to support agricultural development. But it has to be remembered that although agriculture plays an important role for rural development, it is not sufficient for alleviation of rural poverty. The capacity of agriculture to absorb the labour force in rural areas is limited even though the new agricultural technology needs more labour force. As the children below the age of 15 already born in the country is estimated to 5 millions new employment opportunities need to be created in the economy. The diversification of the rural economy beyond agriculture will be therefore, necessary for absorption of the additional labour force. The situation thus calls for the strategy of rural development to expand non-farm activities along with the development of agriculture and physical infrastructure.
7. The ultimate aim of rural development is to improve the quality of life of the rural people. Hence along with economic activities and infrastructure development the rural development strategy should also seek to expand activities leading to the welfare of the rural masses. If the present alarming population growth can not be controlled any rural development programme in Bangladesh could bring about any noticeable change in the life of the general people.

Rural development thrust with only health care might tend to increase the rate of growth of population unless effective family planning measures constitute an integral part of the rural development strategy. Therefore, population control activities, health and sanitation will have to be improved simultaneously.

Family Planning activities need to be further strengthened at the grassroot level in the villages with the participation of the local community. The demand for family planning services is increasing in the rural areas and this has to be satisfied with smooth and timely flow of services to ensure lowering of fertility.

Other important elements of the rural development strategy should be literacy, skill training, concretization of the rural poor, creation of

employment opportunities for the unemployed youth and women and providing a better environment for physical and mental growth of children.

8. Above all, it has to be kept in mind that the success of any programme depends on the people who implement it their attitude, dedication, honesty and commitment. Like most other developing countries of the world these are very much lacking in Bangladesh. Without a thorough change in outlook and moral values of the people at all levels rural development will continue to remain a mere slogan instead of an effective instrument for alleviation of manifold problems of rural life. How this can be materialized still remains a major question.