

Needs of extreme poor should be recognized in policy and practice in Bangladesh

By Eamonn Taylor

My remarks draw on my experience of Bangladesh since 1977. This is my third time working in this great country as a CEO of EEP/Shiree - a Government of Bangladesh project, funded by UK aid's DFID and Swiss Development Cooperation.

Before joining EEP/ Shiree, I had a long term career with the British Government's aid programme. My first job in London was Assistant Desk Officer for Bangladesh. I visited Bangladesh in 1978 and 79. Later, from 1992 - 95, I returned to Bangladesh and set up the DFID Country Office. We had extensive relations with CBOs. I was responsible for Disaster Management. I worked closely with NGOs like Oxfam on relief and rehabilitation of cyclone affected communities.

Who, then, would have believed Bangladesh could be where it is today. Let us look at what has been achieved. And what an achievement it is.

Bangladesh is climbing through ranks of Middle Income Country status. It is sustaining and feeding a population which has more than doubled in size since the trauma of the War of Liberation. A doubling in population but a trebling in food production. **No more *monga***. Today, life expectancy is 70 years. 95 per cent of girls attend school. Great gains have been made in maternal and child mortality. Extreme Poverty is falling fast: from 17.6 per cent in 2010 to an estimated 12.9 percent today. And perhaps 20 lakh people a year now join Bangladesh's middle class.

All of this is a great and positive reflection on the country. Bangladesh is a success story of the Millennium Development Goals - but, despite these success, there remain important challenges. We cannot ignore the fact that about 25 per cent of the population still lives in poverty and around 13 per cent live in extreme poverty. We cannot ignore the fact that a household in extreme poverty is far more likely to experience food insecurity; suffer from ill health; have irregular incomes and less savings; have fewer assets; have less years of schooling; live in geographically remote neighbourhoods; be far less resilient in the face of disasters and natural hazards; and have far less access to safety nets and state support. And in all of this, we must not forget that a far greater proportion of extreme poor households are headed by females.

So, while rightly celebrating Bangladesh's great progress - and greater things to come - we all share one desire: **to ensure no one is left behind.**

The Government share that desire. In his 4 June Budget speech, the Hon Finance Minister said: '*Poverty alleviation ... is a determinant of our progress.*' The 7th Five Year Plan is about 'Accelerating Growth and Empowering Citizens'. It is on the Planning website now. You will want to read it. Specifically, it addresses the issue of Extreme Poverty.

How big is the problem? The Plan It estimates that 12.9 per cent of the population are in Extreme Poverty. That is two crore people.

What is to be done? From the EEP/Shiree perspective, we can say that we know what works: our mission is to reach one million people and help them take enduring steps out of extreme poverty. We will have done that working in concert with our excellent and inspiring Partner NGOs under the leadership of Rural Development and Cooperatives Division. What do we do? Transfer assets to the Extreme Poor with support for asset management, savings and organisational and marketing skills. Our research shows that 95 per cent of our beneficiaries graduate from extreme poverty.

Yes, there are issues of longer term sustainability. Yes, poor people are vulnerable to shocks of ill health and natural disasters and this is recognised in the 7th Five Year Plan, approved by the NEC on 20 October. The Planning Commission note that while economic growth is vital, growth alone is not sufficient to eradicate Extreme Poverty.

It will take the right policy mix of additional measures: replicating successful targeted livelihood programmes; supporting human capital development for the Extreme Poor; and delivering an expanded and inclusive social protection programmes.

We urge everyone to support and engage with the 7th Five Year Plan, with its aims, for the Extreme Poor, to sustain asset generation and contain asset erosion.

Looking ahead: the 7th Five Year Plan sets a clear policy direction and strategy to address Extreme Poverty. This presents a great opportunity for CBOs to work with government in the national interest, in a constructive, collegiate fashion.

Community Based Organizations (CBOs) could engage on next steps to work in a concerted fashion to engage with Government on operationalising the 7th Five Year Plan; work with the Ministry of Finance to get a budget for the Extreme Poor; work with concerned line ministries and departments to support their delivery of the necessary public goods: health, education, infrastructure, and access to finance; and, allied to all this, CBOs could mount a concerted communication campaign to take the poverty agenda to the bar of public opinion. What does it mean: to leave no-one behind? Who has to do what, differently, to eradicate Extreme Poverty?

In conclusion, we believe that the country can achieve its four objectives. We believe you can frame a specific declaration: there is a resilient livelihood model; experience shows that CBOs speaking with one voice is critical to success of their advocacy efforts; there is a positive message: much has been done. Much more can be done and for the specific declaration, could we suggest a rallying cry?

We know what to do. We know what works. Working together - communities, government, civil society - we can eradicate extreme poverty.

With energy, drive and determination, *no one need be left behind.*

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