

National Seminar On **"The Needs of the Most Neglected Communities in Bangladesh: Are they reflected in national development policy and budget of the country?"**

"There is always a time to make right what is wrong."

From the 90s onward, one can notice the re emergence of a global discourse on poverty reduction. The Poverty Reduction Strategy papers (PRSP) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the Government of Bangladesh are indicative of this trend. Theoretically the poverty discourse has also evolved in recent years. In the current discourse on poverty and development, RIB looks at poverty as a multidimensional and dynamic process and not just an experience of economic deprivation. It includes considerations of knowledge and skills, human resources and capacities, vulnerabilities and coping, gender inequalities and human security and last but not least social exclusion and people's initiatives.

Social Discrimination, Ethnic Discrimination as a Cause of Poverty

By identifying social discrimination and ethnic discrimination as a cause of poverty we can include those factors, which are equally responsible for both the underdevelopment of minority communities and the hampered growth of a secular and democratic polity. Forms of social discrimination such as untouchability and caste-consciousness have kept many downtrodden communities such as the kewras (pig rearers), rishis (leather workers) and horijons (sweepers) on the margins of development. On the other hand ethnic discrimination against indigenous people by the majority community has excluded many in these communities from accessing social justice and the benefits of development. For these communities therefore achieving self-dignity forms an equal part of their development agenda as much as food and shelter. The development needs for such community therefore traverses both the realms of needs and rights. Developmental needs have traditionally been the focus of service delivery organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, but special attention needs to be given to such marginalized groups in the form of programmes with a specific focus. In the rights based approach too, the state as the main duty-bearer should ensure that particular rights of such communities be addressed e.g. the rights of grazing for pig rearers, proper redress against grabbing of adivasi land and the respect for customary laws and practices of indigenous communities.

RIB has been working with 28 such neglected communities located in 19 districts of Bangladesh, out of which 11 communities are represented here today. Through using methods of Gonogobeshona (participatory action research) and focused group discussion, researchers of RIB has tried to articulate some of the needs and strengths of such groups. Enumeration of these groups on a national scale is not easy, since many groups are not even enlisted separately in the census. Some like the Bedays are nomads, which make enumeration difficult. Even among those who are listed, there is inaccurate data. For example in the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics report of 1998 it is said that in Khulna Division there are no Munda settlements and that in all of Bangladesh there are about 2132 Mundas in total. They live mostly in Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur and Syllhet. But according to one RIB supported

research, it has been found that 113 families of Mundas live in four villages of Shatkira and they come to 534 in total.

By reviewing several of our research reports on neglected communities we have come across several suggestions on how to strategize for development of such deprived communities. We mention them below.

From Livelihood Concerns to Upscaling Small Producers

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Alternative forms of credit supply

Micro-credit in Bangladesh is by far the largest of development interventions and constitutes the dominant development paradigm. But it has been generally acknowledged through many studies that micro-credit does not really reach or help the poorest of the poverty groups. It also tends to help more the non - agricultural activities rather than the agricultural ones. Neglected communities often find it difficult to abide by the repayment regime, which institutionalized credit imposes. But that does not mean to say that they are not in need of credit. During the off-season, or lean months, they often have to fall back on traditional money lenders on exploitative terms and conditions. Besides many communities have traditional handicrafts and weaving skills, which require seasonal credit system, as they often take to such activities at specific times of the year. There needs to be some kind of special windows for bank loans which will offer them credit at very low or interest-free rates. Institutional micro-credit, which require group collateral throughout the year is not suitable for such communities. Furthermore there are certain “industries” which employ very deprived sections of the urban population like the paper bag or book binding industries. They are not considered to be small-scale or cottage industries and are hence not earmarked for any bank loans from governmental credit institutions. Such small scale enterprises need to be given attention.

Technology for the deprived

One of the successful events of the last few years has been the mobile revolution. This has proven that technology if made accessible and appropriately adapted can be of benefit to the common person. Similarly even technologies like the computer, which in the first instance does not seem to be people friendly for a pre-literate population, can be made available for their use, provided there is an effort to deliver such services, keeping in mind the needs of the people. One such example are the telecentres started by DNet, which help to serve as information service centres for rural farmers and their families and have even successfully reached women in rural areas. The Government needs to encourage such efforts and disseminate such lessons throughout the country.

Technology is more beneficial to and better appropriated by people if they own it or if they have control over its usage. People's ownership of new technologies is therefore also a developmental imperative.

Innovative Education and Health Services

Needless to mention education and health are the two pillars, which ensure the well-being of a future generation. MDGs also affirm this. However if the poverty groups constantly remain deprived of these services, there can be no hope for the general population as well, since they constitute the bulk of the population. For the very neglected and for special categories of people like river gypsies, displacees, women, cultural bias works to exclude them from mainstream development activities. For such categories therefore, innovative measures need to be taken. For example the idea for a mobile school for river gypsies, who are a nomadic population has gained ground in both governmental and non-governmental discourses. Similarly special attention to remote and deprived areas like chars, or the Hill Tracts, or Haor (wetland) areas need to be given.

Access to Justice for Adivasis (Indigenous People)

In order to ensure access to justice for Adivasis and other neglected groups, it is essential that a common ground is developed for discourse and exchange between Adivasi organizations and existing institutions of justice delivery at both the state and non-state levels.

The key points of any such discussion must include the adoption of commitments, by both state and non-state actors:

- a) to end racial, religious and gender discrimination in both law and practice;
- b) to undertake necessary legal and policy reforms;
- c) to enable collaboration between Adivasi organizations and individuals and mainstream justice delivery organisations;
- d) to strengthen community based organizations among Adivasis so that they are able to participate fully in political, economic and social development, and also to deliver access to justice;

e) to establish clear chains of command between different administrative authorities to ensure accountability for purposes of good governance.

Empowerment of Minorities and the most Neglected Communities

Social and often political exclusion leave minority communities and the most neglected communities disempowered. In such circumstances, legal aid services, strong advocacy groups and networks need to be supported and strengthened keeping in mind the special needs of such communities. In this sense a human security perspective becomes part and parcel of development. It is imperative that in such developmental activities, the perspectives of the community members be given importance. For example among the Santals in the northern part of the country, land grabbing has become a serious concern. The legal aid organizations often felt helpless, because they do not have the right information or information has been distorted. In such a circumstance developing a corps of para legal workers among the Santals themselves (locally known as land defenders), who can act as the eyes and ears of the legal aid organization has been seen to be helpful (ongoing research project of RIB in Dinajpur).

Addressing Eco-diversity and Disaster Planning

As the past year has shown Bangladesh is increasingly becoming prone to floods and cyclones, due to international climate change. It is also a country with a great amount of eco-diversity. The Sundarbans in the south west, the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the South east, The Haors of the North and the Charlands of the delta offer diversity in topography, vegetation as well as in the lives and livelihood of the people. Due to many development interventions and policies of the Government such areas have fallen prey to environmental degradation e.g. wrong afforestation policies followed by the Government in the Hills and saline water shrimp monoculture pursued in the south west. The marginalized communities, who sustain themselves through a close link with their natural environment especially are prone to the negative effects of environmental degradation as well as natural disasters.

Environmental protection therefore needs to be prioritized in any developmental enterprise. At the same time government and non-government agencies need to progress from simple disaster management to a disaster planning mode. This will mean looking at disasters in a holistic way, analyzing the nature of each disaster and hence exploring possibilities of effective prevention, forecast as well as effective ways of administering relief, in a short, medium and long term perspective. This needs to be done as proper system from national to local levels with participation of both the local people and experts from different regions (ongoing project of Rib in the Khulna region).