

LAST WORD

Bangladesh: Crucial Questions for Canadian Aid Policy

Bangladesh remains the world's largest enclave of absolutely impoverished people. Two-thirds of the population live below the poverty line, which is reflected in the growth of landless households, high child mortality rates, and long-term declines in per capita protein and calorie intake. "There has been no secular improvement in the well-being of a major share of the rural population over the last 20 years", the *North-South Institute* concluded in 1985. "... The problem is critical."

Bangladesh is neither naturally nor inevitably poor; it does have the resources for development. The explanations for increasing poverty lie in the social and political processes which concentrate wealth and power. Population growth and limited resource endowments are contributory, but impoverishment is chiefly because of unequal ownership of land and other assets, discriminatory allocative mechanisms, and a policy framework which promotes the interests of dominant groups.

The failure to meet the needs of the poor is a reflection of political failure. For most of its short history, Bangladesh has been shaped by a series of military regimes with little popular support. Successive regimes have sought legitimacy by catering to elite interests which have always determined policy context. Development priorities have emphasized industrial development at the expense of agriculture/rural development; indeed, appropriations for the latter have steadily declined since 1974. The outcome is the development of a small wealthy elite and an increasingly poor majority.

Political failure has led also to pervasive abuse of human rights as successive regimes have sought to contain and suppress the dissatisfied majority. During the last decade, Bangladesh has lurched from Martial Law through State of Emergency to today's quasi-civilian regime. Repression of the political opposition, unions, students, peasant organizations and tribal populations, a major obstacle to development, is well-documented by Amnesty International and other advocacy groups.

For Bangladesh's rural majority, the chief resource is land. Almost all literature on poverty agrees that land reform is essential to meet the needs of the poor; moreover, there is compelling evidence that land reform would lead to considerable increases in productivity. Land reform has been on the government's agenda since 1972, but none has ever been implemented.

Education, health and social welfare spending has remained at about 2% of Bangladesh's national budget over the past decade. Spending on defence, police and justice has exceeded 20% since 1974 and topped 30% in the mid-1980s. The health budget actually has declined despite the fact that more than 50% of all children under five are moderately to severely malnourished.

Human rights concerns also focus on the lack of women's participation in development. Most of the programmes have focused on reproductive roles to the detriment of social and economic roles. Serious concerns have arisen about rights abuses associated with population control efforts. While there is a widespread need for birth control education and access to contraceptives, it is essential to distinguish between family planning and population control. The former emphasizes primary health care and reduction of child mortality, acknowledging that fertility regulation requires improvements in the social and economic context of families. Population control in Bangladesh has not embodied authentic primary health care. The approach has been coercive; women have been offered sterilization inducements during periods of flood or famine. Drugs and devices which have not been adequately tested or approved for use in the West are used extensively.

The lack of health services in the population programme has led to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths and permanent injuries. This has led to withdrawal of support for the population control programme by at least one donor country, but Canada continues to provide significant assistance.

To the donor community, Bangladesh poses an enormous challenge. The donor community appears to have adopted a "wait and see" posture on the political situation, while attempting to ensure that at least part of their inputs reach the poor. There is little evidence that the billions of dollars of foreign aid poured into the country since the early 1970s has led to a reduction in poverty; indeed, the evidence is to the contrary. Aid plays an important role in strengthening the political regime and in sustaining the very conditions which undermine poverty-focused development. There is a growing literature related to the extent and consequences of Bangladesh's "aid dependence". This literature argues that aid has led to the creation of a powerful class of people whose interests are tied to continued large amounts of external assistance. Dr. Rehman Sobhan of the *Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies* puts it this way: "The fact that aid and its attendant policies has promoted a more inegalitarian social order... has eroded the compulsion for more effective domestic resource mobilization, and that it has promoted the growth of a class whose appetites begot the need for aid, appear only recently to have disturbed the consciousness of some donors."

Public support in donor countries such as Canada for Official Development Assistance is largely based on the belief that the ODA reaches the poor, yet the structural obstacles in Bangladesh make it difficult to demonstrate this. While many donors privately approve the "stability" an authoritarian regime provides, they should be concerned about widespread rights abuse. And, in acknowledging the values of democratic and participatory development, donors must be concerned that development decision-making is undertaken outside of any framework of public accountability in Bangladesh.

These are issues the Canadian International Development Agency must consider as it finalizes its five-year Bangladesh programme, Canada's largest. Donors must put pressure on Bangladesh to restore democracy and reform its human rights record. It is only through democratic processes that the needs of the poor can be addressed and self-reliance achieved. Such pressure would be a resounding signal that authoritarian and anti-democratic development is contrary to the values and principles enshrined in CIDA's Development Charter. Perhaps most important, it will be an assertion of the primacy of the needs of the poor in development strategies. The current political and development path in Bangladesh leads inevitably to cataclysm.

— The foregoing is an abridgement of a discussion paper prepared by the Asia Working Group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation. —