

# Sustainable Development and Bangladesh

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The concept of sustainable development formed the basis of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development can be interpreted in many different ways, but at its core is an approach to development that looks to balance different, and often competing, needs against an awareness of the environmental, social and economic limitations we face as a society. Living within our environmental limits is one of the central principles of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is conceived to be anchored on three pillars, which are to evolve concomitantly on sustainable factors, namely, economic, social and environmental; and to be centered on the human being, implying that the process of sustainable development is necessarily inclusive and should promote unity in cultural and other forms of diversity. But it is essential, in the context of establishing this unity, that diverse cultures, interests and wishes, particularly of the downtrodden and disadvantaged groups, are facilitated to flourish and find proper expressions in appropriate forms. Sustainable development also invokes intra- and intergenerational equity, i.e. equity among and within nations at the present time and the management of natural and other resources such that while the present generation meets its needs, the future generations can meet theirs too.

Article 18 A : Protection & Improvement of Environment and Biodiversity; in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states that, "The state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safe-guard the natural resources, biodiversity, wetlands, forest and wildlife for the present and future citizens". The pursuit of sustainable development is, therefore, a Constitutional obligation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a disaster-prone country due to its hydrological and geo-morphological realities, its location at the bottom of three major river systems - the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna and being bound on the south by the Bay of Bengal. Given the evolving climate change, the country has begun to be visited by extreme climatic events more frequently. These climatic events cause adverse socio-economic consequences for the affected people and, therefore, are a major concern for national socio-economic progress. For example, mega cyclones Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009 have caused huge losses and damages affecting a large number of people and consumed significant budgetary resources in relief and rehabilitation, thereby constraining the country's development prospects by reducing resource availability for development activities.

Bangladesh has no responsibility at all to this climate change, but it is one of the most vulnerable countries, being at the forefront of threats from climate change effects in terms of increasing sea

level rise, salinity ingress, storm surges, cyclones, floods, loss of habitat, destabilization of agriculture, etc. Without international support for countering the effects of climate change, largely through adaptation actions, Bangladesh is not in a position to fight it alone. The country faces climate change not only as a development challenge, but also as a human rights and justice issue.

Bangladesh is committed to a low carbon development path, provided the process does not put additional burden on its already overstressed economy and financial capacity and is a win-win option for it with assured adequate international support. Already, dialogues are taking place at home with stakeholders for evolving a “green development” concept that promotes a “green economy” and provides “green jobs” in the future. But it has to be in the context of Bangladesh’s priorities for accelerating economic growth, poverty reduction, social emancipation and sustainable development based on its three pillars. Any green development initiative has to be home-grown and country driven policy; and externally imposed conditions are not acceptable.

Rapid economic growth coupled with a rising population is putting a high toll on the environment, ecology and natural resources in Bangladesh. In order to ensure the best possible opportunities for a productive and healthy life for the people while maintaining the balance in nature and ensuring sustainability for future generations, the country has to have “humancentred” sustainable development.

The government needs to ensure coordination amongst the various sectors for ensuring overall sustainability in future through an integrated approach. However, it cannot be achieved fully without adequate support from the international community for climate adaptation . It is also necessary to promote regional cooperation in finding solutions to regional water crisis.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS:**

### **Institutional Capacity Development**

In the area of institutional development, the government is setting up new institutions that will help realize the new vision of the government in the coming years. For example, it is in the process of establishing the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) as the national modal authority for coordinating all national efforts in taking forward its sustainable energy agenda for energy efficiency and conservation and renewable energy promotion in the country.

### **Good Governance**

in respect of the functioning of the Anti-Corruption Commission, Public Administration, Police and the financial sector. The aim of these reforms is to further enable these institutions to perform their responsibilities more purposefully and efficiently. The tasks involved are challenging, but the government is committing to fulfilling them.

### **Strengthening Democracy**

In relating to governance, challenges include the issue of national government at the time of parliamentary elections, the role of the election commission, and the nature and effectiveness of local governance. Resolution of these challenges, particularly the first one, will lead to positive outcomes for both democracy and development in the country. Efforts are continuing to make the local government effective through peoples’ participation, capacity building for local level planning and implementation of projects, and improvement of service delivery to the local level in the areas of health, education, etc.

## **ICT for the People and the Role of Media**

Introduction of cell phone and its widespread expansion into rural areas has changed the lives of the poor people by opening the door to instant communication, information gathering and doing away with isolation. The middlemen have been eliminated. The farmer can now directly get first hand information on market prices from miles away . Cell phone banking is also now available. Modernization of Bangladesh through ICT will continue in all sectors.

## **Status of growth**

The economic growth rate experienced set back due to disasters like the mega cyclones Sidr and Aila in 2007 and 2009 as a result of the effects of global climate change. The combined effect of the two cyclones drove the GDP down by more than 1%.. The GDP growth is attributed to growth in agriculture, industries and service sectors and accumulation of capital and increase in effective labour (total factor productivity-TFP growth). The future challenge is to sustain the increasing trend in growth in the face of domestic and external shocks. The challenge will be maintain the lower trend. throughout the country, based on opportunities in various areas.

## **Industrialization**

In the context of environmental sustainability, the industrial sector has a major role to play, Especially through efficient effluent treatment. Though this is mandatory by law, compliance remains largely disregarded. Untreated chemical wastes, which often contain heavy metals, are discharged into rivers, canals, wetlands and even agricultural lands, severely degrading them and causing health risks to people. This remains a challenge which the government intends to address seriously.

## **Rural Infrastructure**

Experience shows that good infrastructural development is not, often, followed-up by proper maintenance. Increased growth of traffic requires further improvement and regular maintenance of the roads and highways and rural arteries. It is necessary that adequate allocations are provided in the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for the purpose of the maintenance work, which should be completed before the onset of the monsoon in the year it is done.

## **Social**

Social transformation is a continuous process. The positive trends seen in Bangladesh over the last 20 years is expected to continue in future. As more and more women join the workforce there will be more social recognition of their contribution to national development. The current and future plans of the government including the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2016) and Annual Development Programme put emphasis on women development. The government is committed to improving the living conditions of the ethnic and other minorities and ensuring their rights. Their problems can be addressed through identification of most vulnerable locations, creation of alternative livelihoods there and strengthening the social safety net.

## **Health, Population and Development**

The current population of Bangladesh exceeds 150 million, with almost 50% of them below the age of 35 years constituting a large young work force. Importantly, Bangladesh has been able to keep the population growth rate in check with targeted interventions in the population and health sector. The population growth rate is as noted earlier, down to 1.32% per annum, but the large and growing population remains a major concern. Bangladesh therefore needs to continue meeting the challenges of

improving the environment that encourages further reduction in population growth, which will necessarily focus on those segments of population which still records higher growth rates. There is a slow progress in improving nutrition. Malnutrition affects two-fifths of children.

Health experts around the world warn that with rise in temperature, due to global warming, the vector-borne diseases will increase. Therefore, climate change poses a big health risk for the population. More emphasis on research and research-based adaptation programming and action should be in place.

## **Education**

Future challenges remain in relation to increasing the quality of education; proper training of teachers at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels; making school environment attractive; and raising completion rates.

The number of schools, colleges and universities is also inadequate to meet the demand of the growing number of students. However, the increasing rural demand for educational facilities calls for serious attention to be given to expand educational opportunities in rural areas.

## **Gender Development**

The government has put full emphasis on the inclusion of women in all spheres of social life as a strategy for raising women's status, accelerating growth and ensuring the long term sustainability of the country's development. The recently adopted Women Development Policy 2011 is a forward looking step in this respect and, if implemented properly, will contribute to effective nation-building with improved social status and increased participation of women.

## **Forests and Biodiversity**

Laws have been enacted by Bangladesh to protect the biodiversity and penalties made heavier. Enforcing the law is difficult in the absence of necessary manpower and institutional capacity.

The government has recently (January 2012) declared 3 zones of major canals in the Sundarbans as dolphin sanctuaries. These safe havens for the endangered species cover a total area of 32 kms.

Under the law, fishing in these 3 areas is prohibited. But fishing and cargo trawlers are regularly plying through them discharging wastes and oil which are polluting the sanctuaries. Community involvement needs to be ensured in such activities, and the government has been promoting community participation through various initiatives including awareness raising and co-management arrangements.

## **Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture**

Agricultural growth needs to pick up further from its present rate of around 3.5% or so simply to keep feeding an increasing population. But as agricultural land is declining by close to 1 % a year, owing to shifting of agricultural land to other uses and climate change-induced increased salinity ingress and river erosion, the challenges the sector faces in reality can curb its performance. Moreover, the production of rice is characterized by sharp fluctuations between years as well as within the year due to various natural hazards such as floods, cyclones, drought and salinity ingress. Addressing these challenges will require new thinking on how domestic food security goals can be met while sustaining an increasingly fragile environment and a large population dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.

## **Water Supply and Sanitation**

According to the British medical journal 'The Lancet', up to 77 million Bangladeshis are suffering from arsenic poisoning. This can cause cancer unless treated at the initial stage and these people should be provided with arsenic free drinking water

The water supply in Dhaka, the largest city, is severely stressed due to high population growth and expansion of infrastructures. In many parts of the city, the water supplied is unfit for human use. The government is increasing the water treatment capacity in urban areas and has started building a few water treatment plants. It however, cannot provide water to rural households which are dispersed and they do not have access to piped water systems.

A big challenge is the intrusion of salinity in new areas of habitation due to sea level rise which is already affecting about 30 million people in the coastal areas and the number will increase as the sea keeps on rising. In the long run, Bangladesh will require desalinization plants to meet the demands of huge population.

### **Energy Security**

The World Economic Forum (WEF) in its last meeting in Davos emphasized that the world must adopt energy production facilities that are based on renewable resources. The country can fast track the development of its energy sector while ensuring a low carbon path provided adequate resources and appropriate technologies are made available to it from international climate funding sources. The country has taken many steps in the right direction for ensuring sustainable energy security in the country. But as the new and improved technologies are very expensive, the government alone cannot ensure sufficient energy supplies to the people, unless international support is forthcoming under climate mitigation initiative.

### **Green Development, Green Economy and Green Jobs**

Provided appropriate technologies are available, green jobs can be created in such sectors as rice, fruits, spices, flowers, high value vegetables, fishery, livestock rearing, community protected forestry, and other natural resource management activities. Growing more fruits, spices and flowers and high value crops like vegetables can create green jobs. Aqua culture, both in urban and rural areas, can also bring green self-employment for many people if they are imbued with necessary knowledge and skills. Creation of water reservoirs to meet water shortages and fresh water fisheries can be another green economic activity. Community based social forestry schemes and biodiversity protection will also fall under green jobs. Off farm activities like food processing, packaging, distribution, transportation and marketing has further scope for green jobs. Waste collection, sorting, recycling and reuse can also create green jobs. Compost making from bio-waste has the potential for not only green jobs for women but also production of organic fertilizer for crops and plants as some piloting has shown.

Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in respect of all three pillars of sustainable development, especially the social front. Bangladesh is fully committed to pursuing sustainable development, seeking to establish and maintain economic vibrancy, social equity and inclusiveness, human dignity for all, and a healthy environment and a sound natural resource base. However, given its resource limitations, the country needs finance and technology transfer as well as capacity enhancement support, consistent with the properly defined tasks that it will take to move steadfastly towards the goal of sustainable development.

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