

# The Policy of 'Job For All and Education For All' and The 'Empowerment of The Poor' in : Bangladesh

## *An Analysis*

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*Abstract: The activities undertaken by government and non-government organizations for implementing the policy of 'job for all and education for all' in Bangladesh have been critically analyzed in this paper. Though elaborate programs have already been introduced to educate the illiterate and generate employment, this paper raises questions, about the effectiveness of those programs. It shows that education having no connection with employment and does not enhance the level of understanding may not bring about a positive change in the society. The 'empowerment' of the poor, especially women through micro-credit programs undertaken by government and non-government agencies has also been questioned here. This paper indeed challenges the popular concept of 'empowerment' and emphatically indicates the potential dangers and limitations that need to be taken into consideration if we really intend to make our society free of poverty. It says that the poor should be empowered in such a way so that they can work as agents in the process of 'empowerment' and also can appropriate the struggles for their liberation. Only then, it has been suggested in the paper, a structural change may be brought about in our contemporary society. Therefore, the policy of 'job for all and education for all' probably needs to be reviewed in a more realistic way.*

## **Introduction**

Our government has been trying to implement the policy of 'education for all' since the year of 1992-93 which is of course a constitutional obligation. Different activities have been undertaken to educate everybody. Government and non-government efforts are still on to fulfill the target of having all the people educated, though a long way is yet to go. There are many pockets throughout the country where the policy of education for all could not be introduced at all. These pockets must be targeted if we really want to implement the policy in full. But giving only primary education to all would not bring about

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any basic change in the society if the education does not have any connection with getting appropriate jobs. Therefore, it would be a great mistake of introducing primary education having no connection with getting a job. We must think of education and employment simultaneously. Education should be job oriented as well as empowering in the sense that it would promote the understanding level of all people. It does not mean that we are putting emphasis on higher education; rather we are talking about effective and fruitful education that is expected to be instrumental in bringing about structural change in the society. We all know that our country is poverty stricken. It seems that government and non-government agencies have been making all out efforts to alleviate poverty from our society, though the success of all these efforts could be described little. The state policy adopted for the alleviation of poverty is clearly exploitative, discriminatory and full of ambiguity. It is much publicized that multiple activities undertaken by public and private organizations in order to alleviate poverty have started bringing positive results in our society, but the reality is entirely different. We need to analyze the actual situation of poverty alleviation strategy adopted by our ruling class. The introduction of micro credit program for the poor and its success to fight poverty in Bangladesh has often been described tremendous. The micro credit programs of NGOs attack the poverty as it is created through social processes. It is, therefore, one of the major objectives of these NGOs to help correct these social processes. The benefits received from micro credit programs have so far proven essential and effective, especially for rural development, income generation, household's food security and poverty alleviation (Nath 2004).

Micro credit programs undertaken by the government sector to fight the poverty have also some stories of success. There is a project called Rural Livelihood Project (RLP) under Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) supporting and strengthening the government's poverty alleviation efforts through generating employment opportunities for the rural poor, with an emphasis on the poor women. It is a project of Asian Development Bank (ADB). On review of the project activities up to September 2002, it is found that a total of 12472 primary societies have been formed with 359,751

beneficiaries enrolled as member, of which 80 percent are female. An amount of taka 290.04 million has been accumulated as capital by the beneficiaries. A total of 110317 male and female beneficiaries have been given training on staff development, cooperative management and skilled development, which have enabled them to undertake income generating activities (IGAs). One of the important activities of RLP is to provide micro credit for the members having no assets. A total amount of taka 5339.41 million has been disbursed as credit among the poorest members. The recovery of this loan is 95 percent, which is highly satisfactory. Another program called Palli Daridryo Bimochan Karmasuchi of BRDB, begun in 1993 and has so far disbursed taka 4237.7 million among the poorest of the poor. This project is entirely funded by the government and said to have achieved a great deal of success in organizing informal groups of rural poor and imparting training and skill development for IGA and self-employment (Nath 2004).

People from diverse socio-economic groups participate in different micro credit programs, even though the genuinely needy populations do not seem to have much participation in these programs. Therefore, it is well recognized that the poorest of the poor are always left out of those programs (Zohir 2004).

Credit (and savings) programs are the major activity targeting poverty alleviation. Two streams of activity have emerged. On the one hand, there are programs which supply regular and reasonably high amounts of credit to the 'moderately poor' on a semi-commercial basis. These achieve high repayment efficiency and help move these beneficiaries out of poverty. Such operations do not reach the so-called 'hard core poor' who have insufficient productive investment opportunities to generate the loan repayments. On the 'other hand, there are NGOs which supply small, or large but irregular, amounts of credit. These achieve varying repayment rates and are not sustainably alleviating poverty, but are rather providing a 'safety net'.

**Social Empowerment** achieved by the programs is not as dramatic as originally hoped for by the NGOs. Even though NGOs provide a wide range of services and activities covering much of the country and with millions of participants, these have not led to any major change in the

social order. Fundamental factors of rural society, notably the unequal distribution of power and the prevalence of landlessness have not changed. However, participation in group meetings and activities promotes a heightened degree of self-confidence among the poor over time. Women in particular gain a degree of acceptance of their right to move about and even to visit offices of NGOs or government to access services. The NGOs have therefore reduced the degree of isolation imposed on women. This is a notable achievement. The greatly increased participation of women in the national elections has been cited by NGOs as partly a side-effect of this gradual entry of women into public life.

With regard to environmentally sustainable development, most of the programs of NGOs are positive or neutral. Rural credit and training are mainly used for small-scale economic activities such as trading or farming. Others have substantial programs of roadside tree planting and maintenance. Several NGOs are active lobbyists for development and adoption of sustainable land use policies in Bangladesh. Many NGOs are active lobbyists against specific large-scale water resource management projects, notably some of those under the Flood Action Plan, which they see as socially and environmentally damaging.

### **Non-Formal Education, Micro-Credit and Empowerment**

Education and job for the youth should be taken into serious consideration to see our society better functioning. Education is no doubt one of the most important instruments for the empowerment of the youth, but non-formal education or elementary level of education making the illiterate only literate is definitely not worthy. Even higher education having little value in job market and also does not make one think about our society and its people are not expected as well. But very unfortunately that is what is happening in our country. Most of the NGOs are busy with introducing non-formal education getting financially supported by different foreign donors, almost ineffective to have a structural change in the society. Another important phenomenon regarding education is that it may further divide people as educated and non-educated making our already hierarchical society stronger. It indeed reinforces class division, forcing the powerless more vulnerable. The situation has gone from bad to worse as the

private universities, medical colleges etc have been allowed to be established in large numbers where education is very expensive, denying the basic rights of the poor to education. These private educational institutions are simply shopping mall from where you can buy education if you have sufficient money (Das and Islam 2006). So the state policy is clearly in favor of the upper class people. Opportunities, privileges etc are always available for those who have money and muscle power, and therefore the upper class people are very likely to remain dominant in the society. On the other hand, non-formal education, free primary education, non-government primary education and other government sponsored education have been made available for the poor which neither empower them nor increase their level of understanding. Such as the scope of wage employment for the people having non-formal education may be severely limited in a rapidly changing market situation with the continual adoption of new technology, and therefore appropriate income generation program has to be kept in view in a given locality. This needs to be done with full understanding of the possibility to use and improve the indigenous technology, and the importance of encouraging self-employment/entrepreneurship of the non-formal education/continuing education graduates (Islam and Mia 2007). It is therefore non-formal education, free primary education and non-government primary education kinds of education does not have that much demand in the job market. Many NGOs realize that services like adult literacy/non-formal education, skill training, and primary health care are not enough to sustain poverty reduction among the rural poor (Holtsberg 1990). Taking the above arguments into consideration, it is difficult for the poor to climb the ladder of political as well as socio-economic power in the existing social structure.

In the contemporary world, micro-credit programs seem to have been considered as a wholesale cure for both poverty and the oppression of the poor, especially against women oppression. Micro-credit programs have been offered by thousands of NGOs in Bangladesh. Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) are particularly well known for giving small amount of credit and savings to women through peer lending-groups. It is hoped that the access of women to credit and savings through the programs

inspires them to be involved in income generating activities and thereby the programs increase the autonomy of the women and also decrease the socio-economic dependence of women on men (Amin, Becker, and Bayes 1998, 221-2). In addition, women are expected to have self-confidence through micro-credit program helping them to play an effective role in the decision making process of the family since their income is considered important by the male household members. It is therefore opined that the micro-credit programs have empowered the poor women as their value and status have gone high, especially in the eyes of their husbands. Interspousal consultation and more equitable household relations have been ensured because of micro-credit programs (Amin, Becker, and Bayes 1998; Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley 1996).

Micro-credit programs are designed to eliminate gender oppression and patriarchy should be described misleading. Number of studies finds that a considerable portion of women's loans - as well as multiple income generating activities in which loans are utilized - are **mostly controlled and handled by their** male counterparts (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Fernando 1997; Rahman 1999), although it is believed that women's full control over the loans could be empowering for them since in that case they are considered as an important source of family income and thereby treated with greater honor and dignity by the family members (Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley 1996). The critics of micro-credit programs have argued that micro-credit does not necessary have the capacity to empower the rural poor women because of the patriarchal social structure of rural Bangladesh, rather micro-credit may sometimes worsen the situation of those women (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996:61, Greenhalgh 1991:31). Women's educational lacking, their multidimensional responsibilities, institutional and cultural discrimination along with structural economic constraints that they face in their everyday life make them most vulnerable because of which micro-credit program remains mostly ineffective for these women and therefore addressing of women empowerment through micro-credit program does not seem to be realistic (Banu, Farashuddin, Hossain, and Akter 1998). Gender disparity is a very complicated issue and it is indeed not possible to uproot by NGOs or other agents of 'development'. If it is to be done,

then grassroots social movement must be organized by women themselves with a long-term commitment for having a basic change ensuring gender equity in the society. Development workers can play a supportive role in feminist liberation rather than central to the process of such social change. It may increase the capacity of women to tackle injustice in their own lives and can act as allies in their long-term struggles (Parmar, 2003). Empowerment is something which gives greater autonomy to the people and helps them devise strategies to challenge and change their subordinate position in society. The way micro-credit programs empowers the women could at best be described as having a kind of tangible environmental changes ultimately lessening the experience of oppression of an individual and group. So if the oppression is to be uprooted and the poor women are to be made empowered, women should have a kind of radical faith in themselves, challenging different external and internal factors that have made them less human being in the society. Women must recover and develop a positive self-image and self-confidence inspiring a greater propensity to challenge the root causes of their long-term exploitation and oppression.

It is not only women who are thought to be made empowered through micro-credit programs, but there are also many government and non-government development activities initiated for the overall empowerment of the poor. These so-called development activities are basically launched to improve the socio-economic condition of the people living below poverty line. We think it is high time that the development activities so far undertaken for the empowerment of the poor must be evaluated and scrutinized. It is indeed important to understand how far the poor have become empowered because of those initiatives. Our clear understanding is that whether it is micro-credit programs or any other activities targeting the empowerment of the poor are definitely a never-ending process. Because these programs are designed to improve the socio-economic condition of the poor up to a limit only, but never want to promote their condition to that extent where the poor gain considerable strength to compete with the people belonging to middle and upper class. **Apart from** that, such development works are not initiated and implemented according to the will of the poor but mostly imposed from the above. In this

process of development, individual, family etc are identified as vulnerable and therefore they specially need to be taken care of. The whole process does not detect exploitation, discrimination and domination that are very much found in existence in the society and they are in fact responsible for the situation in which the poor live.

### **The Myth of Empowerment Needs to Be Broken**

The above discussion makes it clear that something is being done to the poor but not by the poor and that are being done in the name of empowerment. The poor are rarely thought as the agents in the process of empowerment rather regarded as the beneficiaries of changes usually brought about by the development workers (Parmar, 2003). The popular understanding is that the empowerment of the poor is brought to them through micro-credit programs and other development activities along with their officials but not by the poor themselves. It is very important to realize that the ability of the poor to challenge the domination of the powerful effectively can bring about a structural change in the existing society. Therefore, it is not the perception of the ruling class instrumental here but the perception of the poor about themselves, their ability, confidence and their self worth is very important to have a **fundamental** change.

The perception of the poor as passive recipients of empowerment misleads our understanding to the very concept of empowerment as it reduces the poor to mere objects, not capable of doing much on their own and thereby considering them as disempowered. Activities should be designed in such a way that would help the poor to make use of their potentials to support themselves as conscious agents capable enough to bring meaningful change in their lives and society as well. Only then the concept of empowerment for the poor would be worth-mentioning. What is important is that the poor must be made aware of their potentials to challenge oppression, exploitation and discrimination against the powerless in the society. The poor who experience hunger, violence, harassment, different brutalities, exploitation and discrimination in their everyday life should be made understood that the present social system is an unjust one. When the development activists take the responsibility of empowering the poor on their own shoulder, then the potential struggle to be launched by



the poor for their empowerment is in fact demolished. In the case of micro-credit programs and other development activities, it is definitely clear that there is little space for the poor to articulate their own vision to bring about change in their lives, rather policy makers, planners, development workers impose a kind of change that they deem fit for the poor. Needless to say, this process of development cannot empower the poor since the participation of the poor in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of the programs is rarely present. We should not forget that these policies are adopted mostly by highly centralized administrations basically accountable to the highest level of government or respective foreign donor agencies (Fernando 1997, 156-7). The entire process may be described disempowering for the poor as the potential struggle of the poor is co-opted and directed towards forms of change envisioned and prioritized by an outside party (Kabeer 2001, 81).

### **Recommendations**

It is indeed difficult to recommend some measures for ensuring job for all and education for all and empowerment of the poor in a country like ours. But one thing is clear that these policies adopted by the government cannot be implemented with retaining the existing power structure and social order. The following measures may be helpful to implement the said policies.

- a.** The poor should be made agents of change for improving their overall condition rather than making them passive recipients of empowerment.
- b.** The women and the disadvantaged should be given enough opportunity to realize and utilize their strength, ability, consciousness, and agency so that they themselves can have their vision and make effective strategies for having social change in favor of them.
- c.** The rural poor should be pushed toward having collective strength and solidarity among themselves so that they can recognize their potential to act as an agent for positive change.
- c.** The disadvantaged and the powerless need to be made confident,

assertive and well-aware of their own hidden power and capacity which could be transformed into action for their welfare.

- e. Women should be encouraged to have a concrete solidarity among themselves through micro-credit programs that may fight traditional patriarchal values and thereby making a more gender equitable and gender sensitive social order.
- f. 'Empowerment' is in no way conceptualized on the basis of gender; rather it should transcend gender, class, race, ethnicity etc because of which people are often oppressed. It needs to be kept in mind that class discrimination /oppression or ethnic discrimination or oppression and discrimination of any kinds is of great importance like gender based discrimination and oppression. Therefore, people should be made empowered to fight injustice of any nature.
- g. Education policy should be formulated in such a way so that it should be completely job-oriented as well as education could be made **instrumental** for increasing the level of **understanding** of the people which in turn will challenge the oppressive nature of existing social structure.
- h. The policy of 'job for all and education for all' could be implemented only then when the current exploitative power structure of the society could be transformed into a kind of society which discriminates against no one, treating everybody with human dignity and utmost care and respect.

## **Conclusion**

It may be concluded that the way the policy of 'job for all and education for all' is designed and getting implemented could be described as misguiding and flawed one. This policy hardly empowers the poor, rather disempowers the powerless. To be frank, the current strategies of poverty alleviation adopted by our government reinforce the exploitation of the poor. Therefore, new approaches need to be introduced to implement the policy of 'job for all and education all' in our country.

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Development workers can play a supportive role in the struggles of the poor for their empowerment but should not dominate them in the name of development and empowerment. What is needed is that development activists must work in alliance with the poor by offering resources and support to create an environment in which the poor themselves can empower them through tackling multiple injustices that are well-rooted in our contemporary society. Only then the policy of 'job for all and education for all' would come into reality. And that is in fact empowerment.

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