



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
 Source: **Infant mortality:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **Adult literacy:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **GDI** (Gender Development Index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*; **GINI:** World Bank, *World Development Indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

THE FRUITS OF A LONG ROAD

corruption. This places Bangladesh among the ten most corrupt countries in the world. Parliament has been weakened by opposition walkouts and boycotts. Though the press enjoys freedom, state control of the electronic media frustrates the opposition, which recently demanded resignation of the government. This threat to dislodge the government well before expiry of its term has created an element of uncertainty that may negate some of the achievements of social development effected by governmental and non-governmental initiatives.

Poverty alleviation has always been a major objective of the government of Bangladesh, but a target date for full eradication of poverty has not been set. Governmental and non-governmental organisations are actively engaged in activities that seek to provide safety nets and food security, create employment and increase incomes. Educational programmes have lowered costs and expanded opportunities. Expansion of micro-finance institutions throughout the country has helped. Despite the vast resources injected through poverty programmes, the rate of reduction has been very slow —1.6% per annum for urban poverty and 0.2% for rural poverty from 1984 to 1996. The most recent data indicate a modest increase in poverty in both urban and rural areas from December 1995 to April 1998. In urban areas, 44.3% of the population lives below the poverty line; in rural areas the number is 47.6%. There is certainly a mismatch between the amount of resources directed toward poverty alleviation and actual gains on the ground, indicating a need to rethink approaches so far.

Significant gains have been recorded in access to education and health care. Enrolment for boys and girls is increasing— for the latter at a more rapid rate. The adult literacy rate is increasing but still low compared with neighbouring countries. **Expanding basic health care services have resulted in a lower infant mortality rate, lower incidence of death from contagious diseases, lower mortality rate for mothers and higher life expectancy at birth.** The quality of education, however, has deteriorated. The drop-out rate is high, the attendance rate low and the learning level is much lower than desired. The teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools is 1:70.

The revival of parliamentary life in 1991 provided an opportunity to strengthen democracy. A 1996 constitutional amendment that institutionalised parliamentary elections under a caretaker government created conditions for fair polls. The formation of parliamentary standing committees headed by non-minister members of parliament was a positive step toward strengthening democracy. The landmark Local Government Act of 1997 provided for direct election of a minimum of three women councillors in each Union. Notwithstanding these gains, some areas still cast dark shadows on democracy. The use of money and violence to determine election results persists at all levels, and about 30% of development resources is said to be eaten up by

The government's eviction of slum dwellers in August 1999 tarnished its image and erupted into controversy. Though uncontrolled growth of slums gives rise to many problems, unplanned eviction is the worst thing that can happen to poor urban dwellers. The government promised to rehabilitate the evicted people, but measures to do so have yet to see daylight. Meanwhile, the evicted people are suffering misery and deplorable poverty. NGOs and other civil society organisations have taken up the issue and asked the court for relief. Both NGOs and government are now working toward an acceptable strategy to deal with this problem.

With respect to employment, privatisation of state-owned enterprises and rationalisation of labour-power in state-owned enterprises led to loss of employment. Generous separation benefits helped affected persons create self-employment and eased the problem somewhat but not fully. Structural Adjustment Programmes have caused contraction or closure of some firms, but losses in jobs have been balanced to some extent by new or expanding economic activities. An Employment Bank was set up in September 1998 to create profitable and productive employment for youth. Despite government commitment and action, problems of under-employment and disguised unemployment remain. All-pervasive street violence and extortion indicate the many unemployed youth engaged in anti-social activities.

Generation of employment opportunities is a major objective of the Fifth Five-year Plan.

PROMOTING EQUALITY

Immediately after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the government disseminated information and launched the preparatory process for formulating sectoral action plans. The National Action Plan (NAP) for Women's advancement was formulated, with the aim of mainstreaming women's development into government policies and programmes. The NAP emphasises development of monitoring mechanisms at sectoral ministries by incorporating gender specific indicators and sex-disaggregated data. The aim is to assess the effects of programmes and projects on men and women, make policy decisions and take corrective actions. It is proposed that NGOs and elected representatives be involved in monitoring it.

To promote women in the public service, quotas of 10% of gazetted posts and 15% of non-gazetted posts are reserved for them. The NAP considers these numbers inadequate. The NAP stresses the need for management training and retraining to support women managers. Some accelerated promotions have increased the visibility of women in strategic areas of decision-making.

An alarming increase in crimes against women is cause for concern. Government, NGOs and mass media are working hand in hand to resist violence against women. Recent measures include establishment of a unit for the prevention of oppression against women and children in the Department of Women's Affairs, which documents complaints and offers legal aid. Under the Home Ministry, a unit for the prevention of oppression against women has been opened at police headquarters. Women's investigative

committees are functioning in four police stations in Dhaka and at three divisional headquarters to provide easier access for women complainants. A growing number of legal aid organisations provides free legal aid and legal awareness training to women in the capital and several district towns. Civil society has been sufficiently alerted about such crimes and the press media positively reinforces social resistance.

EDUCATION AND HEALTH

The constitution of Bangladesh enshrines the right of the child to free and compulsory primary education. The Compulsory Primary Education Act was passed only in 1990, however, and was implemented for the first time in 1992. The government has undertaken several measures to enhance enrolment and retention of students. These include: establishment of satellite schools managed by female teachers to help disadvantaged children, especially girls, enter school; establishment of less expensive community schools in the areas with no schools; and the institution of the Food For Education (FFE) programme in 1993-94 under which children of selected poor families are given wheat and rice for attending. The government is also involved in non-formal education with participation of NGOs. The Hard-to-Reach Project deals with education of slum children in major cities.

Government efforts to improve access to education along with increased public spending have resulted in a substantial increase in enrolment, now at 84.7% for boys and 77.1% for girls. The adult literacy rate, though still low (51.0%), has also improved. Despite these gains, the education sector is still lagging behind. Only 7% of primary school pupils complete their secondary education. The urban bias in public spending for education creates inequitable access to education.

The main thrust of government health programmes is provision of primary health care services (PHC), which is recognised as the key approach to «Health For All» by 2000. **Government spending for health has increased in both absolute and relative terms.** As a result, some improvements have been registered: increased life expectancy at birth (59.5 years) and lower population growth rate (1.6%). This is still a far cry from ensuring universal access to health care. About 60% of the population lack access to basic health care services and over 90% of children suffer from malnutrition. Arsenic contamination of drinking water over a vast area of Bangladesh poses a major health problem especially for the poor.

Bangladesh has succeeded commendably in raising the social sector's share of total revenue expenditure which increased from 22.6% in 1990-91 to 25.7% in 1998-99. This latter figure, however, marks a decline from 27.4% of the budget attained in 1994-95. Expenditures for defence have also absorbed an increasing share of the budget, reaching 17.8% of the 1998-99 one. The social sector's share of the development budget has also increased considerably from 14.1% in 1990-91 to 23.5% in 1998-99. This sharp rise was possible because of cuts in public spending for economic sectors such as industry and agriculture. Judged by developing countries standards, these represent impressive gains.

The gains also stand out prominently in quantitative terms. Still, quality of education and healthcare services are notoriously poor at all levels, indicating large-scale wastage of scarce resources.

Bangladesh, like many other LDCs, is undergoing structural adjustment. Besides macro-economic policy adjustments, many sectors, such as agriculture, trade, industry, energy, have been adjusted. The results are mixed. There is no comprehensive evaluation of the impact of these policies. Only recently, a tripartite participatory evaluation of structural adjustment policies involving government, the World Bank and civil society was initiated. Though results are not yet available, this has been hailed by civil society as a step in the right direction.

Conversely, at the regional level, Bangladesh has taken a lead in pursuing the goal of poverty eradication through SAARC (South

Asian Association for Regional Co-operation). SAARC initiated an independent South Asian commission for poverty alleviation and adopted certain time bound resolutions for eradicating it.

- SHAMUNNAY - Dr. Atiur Ratman is Shamunnay's Executive Chairman and also Senior Research Fellow, at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). Dr. Mohammad Ismail Hossain is Professor, at the Department of Economics, Jahangirnagar University Savar, Dhaka. The assistance of Mr. Shahinur Rahman in the preparation of this study is gratefully acknowledged.
unnayan@citechco.net