

Social over individual development

Sajjad Zohir | Update: 17:30, Feb 17, 2019

In the past, the concept of 'social development' embodied a large number of issues packaged under 'social' and considered outside the domains of 'economic' and 'political.' It focused on societal development that shaped individuals' well-being.

That approach gradually was reduced to individuals' development in education, health, sanitation, social security, etc, often bypassing the society. With increased importance of 'social policy' derived within a rational framework, the focus on individuals facilitated analyses of welfare implications within the traditional economic framework.

Subsequently, unilateral transfers through 'safety net' programmes focused on individuals. Along with it came mis-governance, blurring distinction between relative roles of state, markets and non-market transactions. The clamour with governance was the logical next step, a cause spearheaded by external agencies, which often undermine the sovereignty of a national government, the very agency expected to steer social development within national boundaries!

Though demands for democratic practices and accountable governance are locally rooted, the idea of propagating 'democracy' and 'making national governments accountable' remain important instruments of control for these external agencies!

Since all parties in the chain are responsible in governance failure at the national level, there is rationale to make all parties visible in the accountability spectrum.

However, a global forum to address such issues, even if it exists, is beyond the reach of common people. There are reasons to believe that unilateral resource transfers for social development, tied to external borrowing, generally end up serving the purposes of the lenders. A Brief trajectory of that process has been outlined in the first paragraph.

In this regard, one may note that the process relegates national governments along with their ministries and departments to implementing and monitoring

agencies.

Pathetically, even the planning turns into an agency for 'localising' policies and plans formulated elsewhere. In line with the political sovereignty discussed in the first part of this series of postings, one may argue that an aspiring political sovereign ought to have clarity in purpose while formulating policies for social development.

I table three major areas around which the purposes of social development in Bangladesh may be identified.

The very first involves raising the quality of human resources so that they may contribute to domestic growth as well as be employable at respectable pay in the global market. Since growth itself does not ensure socially acceptable distribution of income and the relation is unlikely to wither out in near future, appropriate redistribution of income and assets are needed for social justice as well as social harmony to sustain growth. The third is in the field of social mobilisation and cooperation that proactively shapes an 'identity' having the resilience to withstand negative vibes from both external and internal onslaughts.

All three (and possibly more) are considered by global strategists as well. Fundamental differences however arise when each is dealt with at concrete levels. With no further adieu, this paper (third in the sequel) proposes several initiatives that the national government may consider in their efforts towards social development and sensible external stakeholders may partner with national governments in taking the agenda forward.

Raising quality of human resources

Promote and drastically revamp the institutional structure imparting education and skill. Broadly, there are two aspects to address, subjects and methods, where the latter is tied to institutional setting within which learning is promoted.

Emphasis on science and technology-centric education often gets lost due to the inertia created by a large pool of teachers who themselves lack competence and vision.

To initiate changes, several suggestions are made: (a) universities having the privilege (licensed authority) to issue certificates and make profit should deliver concrete output in terms of technology innovation and adaptation. (b) The universities should be encouraged to take risks (within limits) in subject and teacher choices. It is also important to regulate current trends among some universities seeking perfect (uncritical) alignment with course designs of foreign

universities. (c) Support experimentation with alternative models to prepare the new generation; and traditional methods of grooming young entrepreneurs in business houses, partnership between private businesses with educational institutes, and even the long-forgotten ashram model are worth experimenting with. (d) It is also important to promote innovative ways to ensure mandatory inclusion of all in the general education net. The latter may be facilitated by introducing obligatory teaching services by recent graduates (at different tiers) for a limited period.

Ensure socially acceptable distribution of income

Resources required for social development is often a multiple of the number of people one intends to cover. And, the Malthusian accounting principle for population may be stretched to suggest that quality of social development as well as the quality of human resources in a society are inversely related to the population size. No matter how elitist it may sound, the need to control population in an ecologically fragile land, such as Bangladesh, demands highest priority from all shades of political leaders and policymakers. Banning pregnancy or live births beyond a finite number is viewed uncivil by many. Yet, raising costs of upbringing children to reduce demand for child birth and population growth is not effective for population segments where parents can easily dispense away with their responsibilities. Full coverage of unique codification and of vital registrations are possibly the first steps towards formulation of informed population policy.

Sovereignty does not come free, and it is necessary that the society reduces its dependence on external assistance for social security. Instead, political leaders and policymakers need to find ways to pay for running affordable social security programs. To this end, regulatory environment may be developed for multiple choices of social security programs where individuals/families may participate with contributions. Such initiatives involve drawing up a roadmap to move out of current perception of social safety net to a market-based, but regulated, social security programmes.

Social mobilisation and cooperation that proactively shape an 'identity'

There are several sources of uncertainty that the people residing in Bangladesh are likely to face in the coming years, and possibly for decades. Be it encroachment of construction into waterbodies, indiscriminate extraction of groundwater, allowing industries that are not accountable for the destruction of nature they cause, extraction of gas and other resources, etc., the people need to be prepared to face those uncertainties and bring prosperity by making use of opportunities. This will be possible if strong in-country institutions with inter-linked

interests exist. One potential entry point for rebuilding institutions is at grassroots-levels, where social organisations and community-level activities need to be enhanced. Since there are apprehensions that conflicting strategic and financial interests of alien groups will act towards destabilising the region, grassroots-level social and economic groups are worth investing on for enhancing resilience and ensuring social stability.

Authoritarian approach to countering diversity in the sphere of ideology, as hinted in the first posting on political process, make national leadership vulnerable to manipulations by alien agencies. While managing diversity is a slippery path, the alternatives are worse. With that conviction, few additional suggestions are made: (a) Promote open discourses on beliefs, customs and history with search for our social identity and with no restriction in the name of blasphemy. Nor should there be any bar on critical appraisal of historical evolution of Bangladesh politics and society. I recognises the power of false consciousness. Yet, sustainable social unity may be established if the majority (in religion as well as in politics) is willing to tolerate criticism and are open to critical appraisals of roles played by individuals, social groups and political parties. (b) Encourage exposure of local society to wide varieties of culture and languages is desirable and the freedom of choice generally needs to be encouraged. However, all 'providers of culture' need to come under the sovereign's regulatory body. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's leadership has repeatedly failed in confronting alien electronic media. If we can seriously fight porn on the net, we should have the courage to fight against vulgarity and distortion of history and culture of various segments of population in Bangladesh.

Undertake comprehensive fight against harmful drugs and drug-dealing. Rather than confining the latter to acts of armed forces, involve communities and educational institutions to engage actively. Ideally, the citizens have rights to have images of wrong-doers to be posted on specific websites.

Take pre-emptive measures on social mobilisation to avoid the adversaries/fallouts of the Rohingya refugee settlements – in drugs, arms and human trafficking. Since the settlements remain potential grounds for future instability in the region, its control by the national authority and by individuals with highest degree of moral integrity is of utmost importance. In this regard, delinking ties with one or the other country can hardly be justified. Such moves suit powerful countries, but unfortunately, isolate the smaller less powerful countries and may force them into greater dependence on few.

The list is by no means exhaustive. But the purpose will be served if the readers begin to engage in shaping agendas, we want our political leaders and

policymakers to pursue.

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