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CHAPTER 7 THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST

M. Asaduzzaman
Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Dhaka,
Bangladesh

Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the relevance of sociological analysis of the development processes and selected projects in Bangladesh context. Bangladesh, with a population of more than 120 million is one of the most populous countries of the world. Till recently, the population has also grown rather fast at rates of around 2.5% per annum i.e., doubling every 30 years or so. While most of the people, around 80% or so, still live in the villages, the rate of urbanization is rather fast leading to urban congestion, growth of shanties and pollution.

By the usual development indicators, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the world with a per capita income of only US \$ 220 (UNDP, 1996). The economy is dependent to a large extent on the agricultural sector, not so much directly, as at present no more than 34-35% of GDP is contributed by agriculture, but because much of the rest of the economy, manufacturing industries, services and exports depend on the agricultural output, their processing or servicing. The manufacturing industries account for a small, no more than 10-12% of the GDP. Among these, the industry of ready-made garments is unique in that it is the only major industry which is not dependent on agriculture either as a source of raw materials or as its major customer. It is probably also unique in the sense that it has the potentials of changing many of the social norms in a conservative society such as that in Bangladesh because it is dependent largely on the employment of women. Poverty coexists with income inequality, a major reason of which is the inequality of access to assets and resources. One particular aspect of social inequality is that of gender. Women are less literate, and more prone to economic, social and other forms of exploitation and vulnerability. While people suffer from many types of hardship, the nature also inflicts pain from time to time. Floods ravage the country with almost clock-wise regularity while cyclones along the coast some time take heavy toll of human lives and property.(1)

Challenges of development in Bangladesh are thus many and rather complex. Their resolution calls for not simply sound economic management

but a considerable ingenuity in social engineering. These include among others the development of transport infrastructure, preparedness against natural hazards, checking population growth and fostering gender-equity. There certainly are many others. But these are sufficient to make the general point that in all such cases the non-economist social scientist's role in analyzing the pertinent issues become paramount as a guide towards development practice. The discussion that follows draws on four case studies.

Case Study 1: The Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge

The Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge Project (JMBP) has been designed and is now under construction to establish a strategic link between the eastern and western parts to integrate the country and promote inter-regional trade, economic and social development. It envisages a quick movement of goods and passenger traffic by road and rail by means of a 5 km long and 18.5 metre wide bridge.

The construction of the JMB along with the approach roads involves the acquisition of more than 2700 ha of land on both sides of the river affecting more than 41 thousand people directly and a similar number indirectly. The total number of affected households are about 12-13 thousand. However, there had been attempts from the very beginning to minimize the dislocation by not simply making good the losses but taking up comprehensive resettlement and rehabilitation plan for the project-affected persons (PAPs).

The essence of the resettlement plan is to provide not only a "liberal" cash compensation for loss of land and/or structure to legal land owners but also to facilitate a search for equivalent land for purchase and resettlement. Furthermore, those who have not lost but have otherwise been adversely affected are to be resettled, if they so desire, in particular areas. This applies to the very poor ones.

All these need very complex and time consuming social interactions among several groups of actors. There is the government armed with a land acquisition act and represented for operational purposes by the Deputy Commissioners in the districts who actually serve notice and acquire the land and hand it over to the JMB authority. The JMB authority in turn is required to interact continuously with the PAPs so that the latter may be compensated for their losses and resettled and/or rehabilitated before the land can actually be transferred to the former for construction work. Further there are all sorts of social dynamics set in motion among the PAPs. The JMB is like any other bureaucratic and hierarchical development agency that is so typical in the South Asian subcontinent.

What the above portrays is that a situation conventionally thought of basically as an economic investment decision is also a social investment decision. It means keeping intact as far as possible the community framework and providing a redressal mechanism against the social (and of course,

economic) dislocation that has taken place due to a large infrastructure development project. Social mobilization through publicity campaigns, participatory management of the identification of PAPs, the extent and nature of loss, the search for suitable land, interface with government officials through the intermediation of external change agents and similar other activities are now part and parcel of the development project. Thus, this requires that both the economist and non-economist social scientists work together. Conventional cost-benefit criteria of project evaluation is no longer enough.

Case Study 2: The Flood Control Structures

Bangladesh is regularly ravaged by flood. Two of the most devastating floods visited the country in 1987 and 1988, in which more or less 60% of the country was inundated for several weeks. The floods have wrecked a large part of the infrastructure and the economy by destroying assets and crops and shutting down factories. For the last fifty years, the major public response to floods has revealed that the economic and social impact of such an engineering approach to flood control has been at best mixed and at worst disastrous. In many cases there had been some spectacular changes. The embankments by reducing or eliminating flood risk have altered land use pattern with increased agricultural (mainly rice) production. But not all have benefitted. The wetlands have dried up or become shallower or smaller in size. On the other hand, the embankments have also contributed to the migration of fish between the rivers and the wetland/flood plain. The result has been a very substantial loss in fish habitat, fish production and as a result the decline of the traditional fishing communities. This resulted in tensions between farmers at higher level of land and those at lower level, between those outside embankment and inside, the decline of whole groups of boatmen and craftsmen constructing boats. The problems merit sociological analysis of the social and economic process prior to the embankment and during the post-embankment situation to understand how far these were part of existing autonomous processes and how much is of project-impact. Unless one understands the nature of the processes and their working, it would become very difficult to design future projects of similar nature which require social remedial actions to minimize social dislocation, tension and discord. Again the economist and non-economist social scientists will have to really work hand in glove to make similar projects successful and beneficial to the society at large rather than to only specific groups as has happened so far.

Case Study 3: Changes in Reproductive Behaviour

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh is a densely populated country. The population size in the country is also large. A major direct reason for the dense and high population has been a high level of fertility. While this has been

falling over time, apparently there has been a rather sharp decline over the eighties such that the overall annual inter-censal rate of growth of population fell below 2%. Indeed, according to one estimate the total fertility rate may have fallen from about 7 births to slightly more than 4 while other less dramatic estimates would show the change to be from about 5.3 to 4.2 or so which also is substantial.

There are controversies over the extent of fertility decline although very few would deny the direction of change. What is more contentious is the factors and their relative importance that may have given rise to such a fertility decline. The conventional argument is that reproductive motives and changes are influenced heavily by social norms and practices. Social scientists, particularly sociologists, must therefore find out what has happened in terms of changes in social norms, behaviour and values and how far these are transitory or permanent in their effect, in any, on fertility behaviour. This should then indicate to the policy-maker as to how far social factors may or may not be important and therefore what social forces must be strengthened and which one weakened to make the decline in fertility rate a permanent feature of Bangladesh society. Such sociological analyzes do not, on the other hand, deny the importance of the analysis of economic changes as in many cases, it is the latter which initiates the process of an over-all behavioural change (Mahmud 1994).(2)

Caste Study 4: Women as Industrial Labourers

Women constitute a small proportion of the total labour force, at least in the formal urban manufacturing sectors. Nearly 76% of them are concentrated in the textile, apparel and leather industries. Such concentration is related to the growth of the Ready Made Garments (RMG) manufacturing and exports.(3)

It may be noted that, in a tradition-bound society like Bangladesh, acceptance of an outside employment by women in a men's world has itself been a major social change. The nature and direction of such a change need to be examined. Some analyzes by economists exist in the areas of exports, division of labour, wages and so on. But the issues related to the social factors that led to the growth of women's participation in the specific sector of employment, women's empowerment and its impact on their families, relationships with husbands and some such issues have remained least researched. In order to examine these issues, the inputs from sociologists are essential.

Conclusions

The four case studies discussed in the paper are diverse in nature. In each case, issues mainly of social nature have been raised. These issues which are in many cases crucial for better design, formulation and implementation of the

development process or project remain as yet poorly or little analyzed and understood. The policy-makers can make use of these analyzes to make these projects more socially relevant. Economists have been castigated by many for much of the observed ineffectiveness of the development initiatives of their socially undesirable effects because of their failure to take into account the various social factors and processes at work while proposing development projects. Yet, given the fact that these social processes or factors have remained little analyzed, indicate that the criticism or at least much of it is misdirected. There is an urgent need to focus on the development initiatives in countries like Bangladesh more sharply from sociological perspectives.

Notes

(1) Every alternate year or so a quarter of the country goes under water for a considerable length of time. Two of the most severe floods in recent memory occurred in 1987 and 1988.

(2) See for example Mahmud (1994) who has tried to find out whether institutional interventions for increasing women's income and employment have any role in shaping their reproductive behaviour. Her findings are generally in the affirmative. Moreover, there is a spill-over effect even among women who are not directly involved in the income-raising programmes. While such findings do not necessarily reject assertions made by Cleland *et al* (n.d.), the fact remains that no clear and generalized empirical analysis so far has clearly spelt out the relative roles of social and other factors in determining the observed reproductive behaviour.

(3) For a brief but illuminating discussion on the RMG industry and the policy environment that fostered it see World Bank, 1994, pp.76-81.

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