

A Just and Equitable Development Model for Bangladesh

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Abstract: Defying all pessimistic predictions, Bangladesh has turned out to be a success story in terms of growth and development. International development experts have also discovered Bangladesh as a puzzling but a success story. As a result, Bangladesh is now cited as a role model for other developing countries. However, the much vaunted development model that Bangladesh has been pursuing is highly unjust and inequitable. Accordingly, it makes a critique of the Neo-Liberal Model of Development (NLMD). Such terms as inequality, structural adjustment, privatization, micro-credit and slave like labor in our Garments Industry are also criticized. Instead, it aims to suggest a just and equitable model of development as an alternative that purports to be spatially even, inclusive, participatory, ecologically sound, gender neutral, mitigatory of class antagonism, fair in delivering education and health services to all, and above all, sustainable in the long run. This paper seeks to follow a balanced methodology.

Key words: Neoliberal Model of Development, Inequality, Alternative Model of Development.

Introduction:

It has often been said that Bangladesh has confounded development economists who, contrary to conventional opinions, have often been eager to view Bangladesh as a “puzzle” since she has proved Dr. Henry Kissinger, a former US Secretary of State and perhaps, the most important diplomat of the twentieth century, wrong for his dismissive terms that depicted Bangladesh as a “basket case”.¹ More interestingly, some enthusiastic economists have gone one step further and compared

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Bangladesh more favorably with other countries such as India and Kenya with the implications that it is better for them to follow Bangladesh in certain aspects of development.² According to these economists, Bangladesh has rather been on a trajectory of growth and development for the last two decades by following a neoliberal model of growth and development.³ No doubt, Bangladesh has achieved better than expected if 6 per cent annual growth for the last two decades is taken into account but the Neoliberal Model of Development (hereafter NLMD) that Bangladesh has been pursuing over last two decades has been costly in a number of areas that conventional economists have often lost sight of.

Objectives

This paper seeks to highlight the unjust and inequitable nature of the NLMD extant in Bangladesh while simultaneously emphasizing the unsustainable nature of this model in the long run. Finally, it aims to suggest instead a just and equitable model of development as an alternative that purports to be spatially even, inclusive, participatory, ecologically sound, gender neutral, mitigatory of class antagonism, fair in delivering education and health services to all, and above all, sustainable in the long run.

Methods

By making a critique of the positivistic nature of the NLMD, this paper will follow an interpretive methodology that seeks to avoid the dichotomous nature of development, harmonizes between qualitative and quantitative data, patriarchy and matriarchy, agent and structure and micro and macro and modestly emphasizes an emancipatory goal of the alternative model of development suggested here.

Arguments

Despite the overwhelming dominant nature of neoliberalism, it is very difficult to define it because there are so many uses of neoliberalism.⁴ However, since pace and time do not allow us much digression here, we shall not spend much time here dealing with the definitional aspect of neoliberalism. Rather, we shall try to develop a working definition of it as easily as possible. Neoliberalism may thus be defined as the assault on the post-war consensus that serves as the ideology and practice of the dominant elite classes of the developed and developing worlds alike and whose visible consequences, market deregulation and state retrenchment coexist with the internationalization of economic activities.⁵ A more precise definition has been given by Robert McChesney who defines neoliberalism as “policies and processes whereby a relative handful of

private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profits.”⁶ Real life operations of the NLMD over last two decades and its impact in a variety of ways vindicate both the letters and spirits underlying these definitions.

What characterizes the post-Cold War world order and domestic politics of almost all countries in the world is the dominance⁷ of neoliberalism in almost every walk of life, though as an economic ideology, it is nothing but “an updated version of the classical economic thought that was dominant in the US and UK prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s.”⁸ However, its dominance has been so overwhelming that many of us take it for “granted as natural and inevitable.”⁹ Jason Hickel and Arsalan Khan rightly observe,

Neoliberal ideology has become a totalizing way of life, a worldview that furnishes the terms for everyday praxis and representation, created its own forms of political participation and activism, and promotes a virtually unassailable notion of morality. It is not just a manipulative ploy to appropriate surplus value, but a regime in the truest sense of the term- a cultural logic that insinuates itself into every aspect of lived experience.¹⁰

Possessive individualism at the cost of the greater society has been at the heart of the cosmology of neoliberalism. To the neoliberals, an individual agent is more important than the macrostructure of society. From this standpoint, it favors an unequal gain for individuals or a class of individuals at the cost of greater society. Accordingly, the central question of American liberalism is “to protect the individual’s autonomy and choice from the encroachments of others which would require dismantling class distinctions through redistributive mechanisms.”¹¹ Accordingly, inequality among individuals is thought to be normal and it is given in the discourse and practice of neoliberalism as it evolved in the US. From this perspective, it is understandable that countries practicing NLMD have been experiencing inequality which has been increasing exponentially among countries and within countries all over the world. In fact, “income inequality has increased in developing markets such as India, Russia, and across much of the industrialized West, from the relatively laissez-faire United States to the comfy social democracies of Canada and Scandinavia.”¹² Over the last three decades, a new class of global elite has been emerging at the cost of the working class all over the world.¹³ They are increasingly becoming a transglobal community of peers who are more identical with each other than their countrymen back at home.¹⁴ In fact, the nature of inequality between the rich and the poor has been so pronounced that long term sustainability of

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capitalist society itself has been questionable. This explains why Robert Skidelsky, an internationally renowned political economist aptly said, “Inequality is Killing Capitalism.”¹⁵ Robert Skidelsky’s line of reasoning has been given credence by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, who shows that extreme inequality produces a macroeconomic drag because the very rich, despite conspicuous consumption habits, are not in a position to consume all that they earn. On the other hand, the attempts of the working and middle classes to sustain living standards in the face of real wage declines led to excessive consumer borrowing (enabled by the banks), which was heavily responsible for the housing bubble. A more egalitarian society, with broadly distributed purchasing power, is better equipped to maintain macroeconomic balance, maintains Stiglitz in his *The Price of Equality: How Today’s Divided Societies Endanger Our Future*.¹⁶

Even the apologists of the NLMD who annually meet at the World Economic Forum as Davos, Switzerland in order to glorify and preach the virtues associated with the capitalist model of development have willy-nilly acknowledged that income inequality and corruption are the twin problems, threatening the global economy. While delivering the keynote address at a seminar of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on income inequality, Richard Freeman, professor of Economics at Harvard University observed:

..the triumph of globalization and market capitalism has improved living standards for billions while concentrating billions among the few. It has lowered inequality worldwide, but raised inequality within most countries.”¹⁷

Bangladesh is no exception.¹⁸ The elite who are the major beneficiaries of development activities over the past two decades have achieved disproportionately at the cost of the general masses who have most often been deprived and exploited. As a result, 40% of the wealth has been concentrated in the hands of the 10% families.¹⁹ In fact, concern has rightly been expressed that “economic growth has not been shared fairly and the current economic crisis further widens the gap between the rich and poor.”²⁰ The resultant effect of growing inequality between the rich and poor has been increasing poverty in Bangladesh.²¹ Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir and K. M. Mustafizur Rahmman of *Unnayan Onneshan* have rightly observed:

The number of population under poverty line is still increasing. The number of population below poverty line has increased from 51.6 million in 1991-92 to 56 million in 2005 with an average rate of 0.314 at

national level. If the current trend continues, the number of population living below the poverty line might stand at 57.3 and 59.8 million by 2013 and 2021 respectively.²²

Privatisation and trade liberalisation promoted by neoliberal doctrines have failed to reduce poverty or ensure social protection for the poor, instead, it increased concentration of wealth and disparity in the society in Bangladesh. This has been concluded at a seminar on 'Neoliberalism, Poverty and Social Protection Policies' organised by *VOICE*, a research and public education organization, at the National Press in Dhaka. Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, executive director of *VOICE*, said that by following neoliberal market policy, a great human catastrophe has been created, resulting in financial, food and climate crises. Its result is more than 25 lakh households are falling into poverty, while there has been a 36.7 percent income decrease in the last two years due to these crises.²³ Bangladesh has already experienced social tension and violent protests because of the widening gap between the rich and poor²⁴ and it does not portend well in future. In other words, the NLMD has ominous implications for Bangladesh in the foreseeable future.

The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) launched by the IMF in the 1980s²⁵ was one of the most ambitious and controversial programs associated with neoliberalism. As part of the common agenda of neoliberalism, IMF and the World Bank policy measures dismantled public institutions and enterprises with a view to depriving people but giving immense clout to big business; removed all support and protection for local industries and agriculture by liberalizing imports; supported exported-oriented activities to meet the needs of western markets by supplying cheap products at the expense of economy and environment; withdrew the state's responsibility of providing health care and education to the poor; and raised the prices of fuel and electricity and augmented the fees for education and health care to create good business opportunities for global companies. The impact of SAPs on people everywhere was devastating since wealth disparity has increased many fold within countries as well as between countries due to the implementation of these policy measures dictated by the IMF and the World Bank.²⁶ The overall effects of the SAPs have been devastating over the developing countries since these imperial policy measures increased poverty, inequality and hunger and sacrificed human rights at the altar of free market in the name of development.²⁷

Bangladesh was one of the first countries to adopt policy reforms dictated by both the IMF and World Bank as part of the SAPs. As a result, the economy of Bangladesh was "subordinated to the guidelines

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and targets laid down in the Policy Framework paper prepared by the IMF and the World Bank.”²⁸ As part of the same neoliberal economic ideology, the Poverty Reduction Strategy was initiated by both of these institutions in the late 1990s. In essence, the Poverty Reduction measure “was nothing but a sugar-coated SAP declared to reduce poverty by keeping or even strengthening some of its root causes.”²⁹ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) which is a new version of the old policy measures associated with SAPs added a social dimension of development to ameliorate poverty but researchers have expressed logical apprehension about the prospect of poverty reduction at 50 per cent through PRSPs by 2015.³⁰ Trade liberalization has been suggested as part of the SAP dictated by the IMF. Accordingly, Bangladesh liberalized trade and developed a liberal trade regime but economists are not sure whether the liberalization of trade has been favorable to the domestic economy of Bangladesh. In fact, there is a lack of consensus on the issue.³¹

Bangladesh implemented the policy prescriptions dictated by the IMF but she “had to swallow all disastrous contract with multinational companies that paved the way for their looting of natural resources” and experienced “the silent erosion of national capabilities.” No doubt, Bangladesh experienced growth of resources but it was accompanied “with the rise of a criminal hidden economy, and the affluence of a few but also deprivation of many.”³² Professor Anu Mahmud, a veteran leftist economist and activist rightly remarked:

In fact the process of reproduction, not reduction, of poverty and inequality was strengthened. During the last ten years, people living under the poverty line increased from 51 million to 61 million. Only 10 per cent of the population have gained in the share of GDP, while the 90 per cent of people shrunk.³³

The much talked Grameen Bank and its micro finance program have been heralded all over the world as a success story of Bangladesh for reducing poverty. Professor Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank who received Nobel Prize in Peace in 2006 has been hailed as a national hero of Bangladesh³⁴ but the much heralded success of the micro finance program of the Grameen Bank, especially its role in reducing poverty among women in Bangladesh and in other countries are questionable.³⁵ Given the dominance of neoliberalism in international development discourse and practice, the Grameen Bank was regarded as something revelatory.³⁶ Here Grameen Bank and various NGOs exhibited new ways of dealing with poverty and underdevelopment while accepting

uncritically neoliberalism's determined focus on the unquestioned application of market forces and private individual entrepreneurship.³⁷

That the profit-driven motives of the Grameen bank and other NGOs who use coercive and brutally punitive measures to recover loans from defaulters have amply been exposed by Lamia Karim.³⁸ Microcredit borrowers take loan for emancipatory purposes but finally they become victim to the enforced institutional discipline and techniques of powers administered by various NGOs. Dominance of the Grameen Bank and other NGOs is passively resisted by borrowers who criticize rules of programmes and procedures out of earshot and out of sight of the officials of the NGOs. Poor people take loans year after year to get out of poverty but finally they end up getting further mired in debt.³⁹ Ensuring a win-win situation for the poor that the microcredit organizations like the GB or BRAC and other NGOs originally promised failed because these "organizations reinforce pre-existing kinship and gender structures, and there has been a scale mission creep, which has turned micro-lending businesses or installment collecting organizations."⁴⁰

The garments industry in Bangladesh which fetches 80% foreign currencies of Bangladesh has been hailed as a success story almost all over the world.⁴¹ Bangladesh occupies second place after the People's Republic of China in terms of her contribution to world's apparel markets. It is often claimed that this sector has contributed to the empowerment of women since it employs almost four million women who have little or no prospects getting employment outside home. There is no denying the fact that the Ready Made Garment (RMG) which is, in turn, a pillar of the NLMD has brought about qualitative changes in the sphere of economic growth in Bangladesh since developed countries have shifted their labor-intensive manufacturing industries like garments to the developing countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam as part of neoliberalism. However, the RMG sector in Bangladesh has been subject to controversies all over the world due to the slave labor that it employs and the inhuman working milieu in which the poor workers in Bangladesh manufacture apparel for the consumers of the developed countries who are used to wearing clothes at the expense of the workers in the Third World countries. The wages that RMG workers receive from their employers, the owners of garment industries are so low that it can't be called living wage because TK. 3000.00 which a worker gets as monthly wages is evidently insufficient.⁴² The low wage situation is again made worse by the inflationary trends and skyrocketing prices of the essentials in life. The irony is that women who bring vital resources to Bangladesh by earning

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US 19 billion dollars annually bear the brunt of an appalling labor-safety record.⁴³ The indigenous owners of the RMG sector are no doubt primarily responsible for the appalling working condition in garment factories and low wages paid to them and lack of the right to form trade unions in this industry. However, slave like conditions the RMG sector has been aggravated by the nexus that foreign buyers have formed with their Bangladeshi business partners over the decades.

Alternative Model of Development

What is the way out of this culture of deprivation, exploitation and injustice brought about by the NLMD? Some might suggest socialism or Marxism as an ideology to replace the hegemony of the discourse as well as the practice of neo-liberalism. But history of social change bears testimony to the fact that socialism or Marxism as an emancipatory ideology failed because as a social philosophy when implemented, argues Francois Lyotard, a French philosopher of postmodernism, socialism ended up being totalitarianism under Joseph Stalin and Mao Zae Dung. The days of grand narratives which characterized Western thought since the enlightenment as universal ideas suitable for all societies and the idea of progress that characterized the politics of social change since the French Revolution in 1789 are over.⁴⁴ Instead, Lyotard postulates that metanarratives should give way to 'petits récits', or more modest and "localized" narratives. Drawing from the works of Wittgensteign and his theory of the "models of discourse", Lyotard constructs his model of a progressive politics that is grounded in the coexistence of a whole range of diverse and always locally legitimated language games. Postmodernists strive to replace metanarratives by focusing on specific local contexts as well as the plurality of human experience. They argue for the existence of a "multiplicity of theoretical standpoints" rather than grand, all-encompassing theories.⁴⁵

Despite worldwide economic recession since the autumn of 2008, neoliberalism is still dominant as a paradigm or theory of economic life. But to kill an old theory, we, as Keynes once said, need a new theory. Nevertheless, the challenge of developing a different economic model will remain because we can't simply propose another grand model or theory. Rather, we, who are real opponents of neoliberalism need to formulate a new approach to economic policymaking, not one that tinkers at the edges of the existing model. This will involve rethinking the objective of economic policymaking to bring in non-monetary measures of progress, such as wellbeing, and to take account of resource constraints. It will involve a re-examination of the ways in which public

policies can best promote full employment. And it will involve developing new rules for fiscal and monetary policy.⁴⁶

As part of new fiscal and monetary policymaking, we need to democratize the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO to ensure that developing countries like Bangladesh have the capacity to defend their economic interests.⁴⁷ It is thought that once these institutions, especially the World Bank and the IMF are democratized, they cannot impose the conditionalities that have done huge damage to countries like Bangladesh through SAP in the past. Bangladesh needs to strive with a view to lessening her dependence on foreign aid and development loans. It is encouraging today because Bangladesh which had 80% dependence on foreign aid during 1975-80 Period has been able to reduce the magnitude of her dependence on foreign aid and her foreign aid and development aid dependence are only 20%. As part of the alternative model of development, we have to reclaim the idea of substantive freedom in Bangladesh. With a view to achieve real freedom, we have to reject the neoliberal version of freedom as market deregulation, which can be construed as the license for the rich to accumulate and exploit, and license for the few at the top of the society to gain at the cost of the many.⁴⁸ Instead, we have to assert that meaningful regulation can *ipso facto* promote substantive freedom if by freedom we mean freedom from poverty and want, freedom to have the basic human dignity to be bolstered by public education, decent housing and public health care, and freedom to earn a decent living wage from a hard day's work.⁴⁹

The ontology of the neoliberal development of model is very much the idea of possessive individualism in which only a few get at the cost of the rest of the society. This types of atomistic individualism simply derogates the very idea of development. Instead, we need the concept of development in which the community is glorified and everybody in the community gets and not a few individual. This is more a "human development" model that Amartya Sen advocates for the equal gain of everybody as a universal right. In this light, Bnagladesh Government should give up the IMF-dictated neoliberal model of development for the few and instead should practice the communitarian development in which everyone can get a fair share for living a decent living. Since this was the original promise of the great National Liberation Struggle of 1971, the Bangladesh Govt. should also go back to its spirits of liberation and practice communitarian development model. The direct lesson of this commitment of the national liberation is to attack the very concept of inequality which has been the dominant result of development over last thirty years in Bangladesh.

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In broad terms, two types of remedial measures may be used to reduce or prevent a rise in income inequality. First one is through redistribution of income or wealth and the second one is to find ways and means of raising the incomes and wealth of the lower income people at higher income level than of the higher income groups. One way of reducing inequality is to redistribute income through progressive taxation of the rich people and spending the same to support the low income group. Another means of helping the lower income groups is accelerating the rate of increase of their incomes is to increase expenditure for helping the small and marginal farmers.⁵⁰ Since spatial inequality has been growing between the rural and urban areas, it is time for the govt. to increase investment in the rural areas in terms of industrialization. Rural people should be given income support so that they stop moving to the already over-populated cities. The govt. also needs to increase public sector investment for employment generation in the rural areas. These could be done by building more schools and investing in the transportation sector.⁵¹

It is true that Bangladesh stands 34th in terms of economic inclusiveness and performs better than either neighbouring India or Pakistan. Bangladesh needs to stress more on economic inclusiveness without compromising environmental sustainability.⁵²

To follow communitarian development based on universal right to development by everybody, Bangladesh Govt. should try to practice more or less a holistic type of development that includes not only economy but also politics, society, culture and ecology. If really practiced, this type of development will not only include the society, but also emphasize the aspects of governance, which is at the root for fostering more or less equitable development. Cultural traditions and ecological balance should always be in the minds of development planners as well as practitioners in this holistic type of development.

Global climate change and population pressure combined with neoliberalism as an approach in generating growth have really degraded ecological balance. The Govt. should take immediate measures preventing the forcible possession of dying rivers and other water bodies through encroachments. Environmental scientist Ainun Nishat rightly expressed such opinion in his interview with the *Daily Star* on encroachment as an issue. All across the country, rivers have been converted into a series of ponds through the construction of cross-bunds. Thus, many free-flowing rivers have now become a series of stagnant water body.⁵³ (The Daily Star, January 1, 2016). To protect the existing rivers and to ensure the sustainability of them, some measures need to be taken as soon as possible⁵⁴ (*Dhaka Tribune*, February 2, 2017).

The government of Bangladesh should pay attention to fixing the low wages which workers are used to getting in different sectors. In fact, the case of wage is so low that most workers are not getting even living wages. As seen before, even in the garments sector, her Garments (RMG) workers are still getting lowest wage in the world.⁵⁵ The case of construction and transport workers are not good either. Gender equality should be taken into consideration while fixing wages in sector dominated by women. Keeping this inhuman wage practice, the government should intervene and fix a minimum living wage for workers in almost all sectors to give them a stake as well as dignified life in the economy as well as society.

Our performance in the unemployment sector is also dismal. According to the International Labour Organization and the World Bank, 41 per cent youth in Bangladesh do not work, do not go to school and do not train. The situation is worse for female. More alarming is the graduate unemployment, which now stands at 47 per cent. In this light, Bangladesh should revamp its education policy and emphasize upon skill building through technical and vocational education.⁵⁶ Rural Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can easily absorb women workers. Government should also a small amount of loans to women to raise livestock⁵⁷

Banking sector has performed worst in recent times and it is going to be a drag on the overall economy. Banks, especially some state-owned banks, are seriously facing the problem of default loans. People with political connections are causing this financial mess. In this light, the Government of Bangladesh should pay attention to financial governance and establish an independent Banking Commission to run the banks so that these financial institutions can work based on efficiency, transparency and financial inclusion. Everyone should keep in mind that a sound banking system is needed for a sound economy. The sooner it is done, the better it is for the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

It is true that Bangladesh has made progress in terms of both growth and development over last four decades. But the growth story of Bangladesh is problematic in that the NLMD that Bangladesh has been pursuing has been giving rise to inequality, social deprivation and relative poverty. That the very basis of this model is glorifying the individual is reductionist because it creates a few rich at the top at the cost of the overall society. In this light, Bangladesh should follow an alternative model of development that is more equitable and inclusive in nature. As

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part of this alternative model, the government should invest in social welfare through taxation and heavy investment in rural areas. Once this investment generates employment, people will get benefit. Agro-based industries should be encouraged for both rural development and employment generation. As a result, poverty rate will reduced in rural areas and rural migration to the cities will decrease. Ecology should be at the centre of this alternative model of development. Once ecology is taken care of, agricultural output will increase. The river system should be preserved as part of ecological balance. In fact, the Government should pay utmost attention to the preservation of the river system. The Government should also play an interventionist role in fixing the minimum living wages for all sectors, especially garments, transport and construction sectors as part of the welfare measures and inclusive economic system. Fixing minimum wage should also be part of the governmental initiative to reduce absolute inequality that characterizes the neoliberal model of development. Fixing wages, especially the wages of the women folk should be taken into consideration because women are perennially paid fewer wage compared to their male counterpart. Banking sector should be rejuvenated through a regulatory mechanism such as an independent Banking Commission to ensure soundness of the economic system. Time and space do not allow us to elaborate an alternative model of economic development more comprehensively in this short paper. Moreover, this paper is more suggestive in nature. In this backdrop, more research should be undertaken to develop a more comprehensive alternative model of development for Bangladesh.

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