

## Chapter 3

### Participatory Consultations on Poverty Reduction Strategy: Emerging Lessons

3.1 The past decade has been both a time of hope and a time of despair. The consultations with the poor held in both rural and urban areas as well as with the civil society confirmed several positive trends as well as negative concerns.<sup>17</sup>

#### A. Positive Achievements

3.2 The grass-roots consultations point to general improvement in several quantitative indicators. These include: increase in educational and health facilities, increase in enrollment at primary and secondary levels, reduction in gender inequality in education, better access to preventive health care, greater awareness about diseases and environmental health, and improvement in child nutrition status. The consultations indicate the general favorable effects of government-supported targeted cash/food programs such as old-age pension schemes, vulnerable group development (VGD), food-for-education (FFE), and food-for-works (FFW). The consultations also reveal the potentials for further improvement in each area both in terms of equity and efficiency through ensuring closer monitoring, coordination and accountability of relevant development agencies at the field level.

3.3 The grass-roots consultations indicate important changes in market arrangements having implications for the livelihoods of the poor. Considerable labor market dynamism has been noted with pronounced role for seasonal migration, tightening of the labor market and discernible shift from casual to contract labor, and generally rising agricultural wages. The consultations suggest the growing role of remittances, and faster expansion of non-crop (especially, poultry and fishery) and non-farm (especially, transport, trade, and services) activities. A perceptible increase in employment opportunities both within and outside of agriculture in the rural areas has been noted with rising share of peri-urban employment and seasonal migration. The consultations also indicate considerable change in the tenancy market, with gradual shift from share-cropping to fixed cash tenancy in case of HYV cultivation during the winter (*boro*) season. Remarkable change has been noted in the credit market, with a generally declining importance of the role of traditional moneylenders and attendant extra-economic coercion. The credit access on the part of land-poor—especially for emergency purposes--appears to have increased, with women playing an increasingly important role both as small savers and small lenders.

<sup>17</sup> The materials used in this section are drawn from the Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation Report of BRAC (2002) prepared in connection with the formulation of the present strategy. Additional materials have been used from previous consultations carried out as part of the preparation of *Citizen Task Force Report on Poverty* (CPD 2001), *Voices of the Poor Study* for the World Development Report 2001 (Proshika 2000), and consultations carried out by the People's Empowerment Trust (Action Aid 2002).

3.4 On the well-being dimensions, acute deprivations measured in terms of food and income entitlements seem to have improved. Enhanced access of the poor can be noted in terms of some basic non-income dimensions of poverty such as schooling and health care and access to water supply and sanitation. Visibility and voice of women in intra-household and extra-household contexts have also increased. Perhaps, the singular idea that emerges from the participatory consultations at all levels relates to the deep sense of awareness relating to under-performance relative to potentials in every respect. There seems to exist a general agreement that through improved governance and better coordination among the government, the private sector and the civil society, the major development impasses facing the country can be overcome.

## **B. Areas of Key Concerns**

3.5 The grass-roots consultations have also revealed several key concerns that represent powerful negative tendencies in the development experience of the nineties.<sup>18</sup> As one participant—a day laborer in Rupsha thana -- puts it, “positive developments in our lives have been precariously counterbalanced by equally powerful negative tendencies”.

### ***Law and Order and Economic and Social Violence***

3.6 Law and order has been identified as a critical concern. This has been attributed to weakening of governance, criminalization of politics, corruption, violation of citizen rights, break-down of traditional moral order, and intolerant political culture. The law and order situation is marked by insecurity and violence, having negative implications for poverty reduction. This also reveals several interlocking aspects of vulnerability and the often-neglected psychological aspects of poverty.

3.7 The consultations point out the need for democratizing the state institutions operating at the local level including reform in the police system. The identified objectives of reforms include accountability of the law-enforcing agencies to the civil administration, greater sensitivity to issues of human rights, increased transparency and enhanced effectiveness. The growing violence against women both in public places and at home has been identified as a major social concern in urban as well as rural areas. This represents a serious constraint on the physical mobility of women, acts as a hindrance to women’s participation in market activities especially in the labor market and restricts their pursuit of education beyond the primary level and access to health services. The emergence of *mastanocracy* (local terrorism) imposing considerable “transaction costs” on normal economic activity has been singled out as a major barrier to private investment and socially secure life. The emerging picture is strikingly uniform in this respect—from *Rupsha* of Khulna and *Sadar Upazilla* of Barisal to *Mirsharai* in Chittagong and *Poba Upazilla* in Rajshahi, from *Sadar Upazilla* of Sylhet to *Savar* in Dhaka. Patron-client politics, rising educated unemployment, criminalization of economic and political activities, and lack of adequately effective state machinery reflected in the declining enforcement capability have been cited as the major triggers of organized crime and violence and principal causes of persistent law and order problems and widely shared feeling of citizen insecurity in the country.<sup>19</sup>

3.8 The grass-roots consultations have provided important insights regarding the social background of the local terrorists as well. While there exists considerable social heterogeneity, the terrorists are mostly high school or college dropouts, suggesting the

<sup>18</sup> This has been mirrored by several micro-level repeat village studies. See Siddiqui, K. (2000) *Jagatpur: 1977-97. Poverty and Social Change in Rural Bangladesh*, University Press Limited, Dhaka and Westergaard, K. and A. Hossain (2000), 'Boringram Revisited: How to Live Better on Less Land' in R. Jahan (ed) *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, University Press Limited, Dhaka.

<sup>19</sup> As one participant in the consultation in Savar has put it, "Bangladesh has become contaminated with three evils --organized crime and terrorism, phensydl drug, and arsenic."

possibility of interface between educated unemployment and terrorism. The political patronage was mentioned as one of the important concerns. The consultations at the divisional level have stressed the need for setting up of an independent judiciary, an independent anti-corruption body, a powerful office of the Ombudsman, and highlighted the role of a free press and active media. Many grass-roots participants have advocated the setting up of separate TV channels for the poor, which would be focused on development issues as well as programs that promote awareness about citizen rights and civil liberties. Many participants also supported recruitment of women police in large numbers, including the idea of hiring of female sub-inspectors for each thana; this was seen as an instrument of socially empowering women at the community level as well as facilitating more effective access to justice.

### ***Effective Local Government and Decentralization***

3.9 The consultations reveal the importance of local government as one of the most desired institution for improved governance, accelerated economic growth, and faster poverty reduction. Attention was drawn to the fact that Bangladesh has the highest population density in the world (excluding the city-states) and it is difficult to govern such a vast mass of population from "one centre". Thus decentralization and devolution of power has been suggested as a technical necessity for good governance rather than a matter of political choice. A broad-based suggestion emerged in favor of creating a multi-tier ensemble of effective local government bodies at union, thana, and district levels. The consensus view was that public action can have maximum impact on poverty only with the support of a strong (with adequate financial and administrative power) and popular (elected with people's mandate) local government. Without having effective structures of local governance at union and thana levels, the issues of improving quality and enhancing accountability of public services at local level cannot be effectively addressed.

3.10 The consultations indicated broad areas where local government can and must play a critical role. One such area is the management and coordination of many nation-wide programs such as targeted food or cash assisted programs designed for the poor. Similarly, the consultations strongly favored local government's involvement (with active

support from the community) in the management of schools, community clinics, union-level family planning and health centres, and thana health complexes. A strong and effective local government was also considered necessary for coordinating various government and non-government programs in an area thereby reducing wastage and duplication, and facilitating greater synergies. The consultations strongly recommended the development of local-level democracy through the promotion of grass-roots organizations as well as fostering community activities that encourage greater social solidarity. The consultations have broadly suggested the need for ensuring effective women's participation in local government affairs by addressing both representational and functional aspects. The developmental role of the elected women representatives needs to be strengthened further.

3.11 The consultations suggested that the local bodies should be given adequate budget allocations on a matching grant basis keeping in view the poverty ranking of the area. While decentralizing without capacity building at the local level would not produce the desired results, it was argued that this should not be used as an argument against devolution of power. The support for an effective local government and decentralization at various levels has been very strong throughout the consultations irrespective of administrative divisions and socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants.

### ***Quality of Education, Health, and Public Services***

3.12 The grass-roots consultations pointed out many weaknesses in the current pattern of delivery of education, health and public services. Many rural participants expressed concerns over teacher absenteeism, hidden costs in getting admission at the primary level, leakage in food-for-education (FFE) and in stipend schemes for girls attending secondary schools, low quality of education, and rising costs for meeting private tuition expenses. Poor quality of teachers and inadequate learning materials were cited as major weaknesses.

3.13 Participants in general voiced negative assessments about the effectiveness of food-based assistance schemes and suggested the need for effective cash-based delivery systems. The food-transfer was advocated only in the context of emergencies and very poor areas. The abolition of the financing of food-assisted programs through GOB procurement beyond the critical minimum need for maintaining overall food stock at the national level was advocated. These measures were seen as instruments for improving efficiency in the targeted programs and reducing wastage and corruption.

3.14 In both rural and urban consultations, a critical concern among the poor was the widening of the "education divide" between the rich and the poor. The poor were not able to provide their children with quality education. Consultations suggested a multidimensional action program involving the provision of uniform curricula at the primary and secondary levels, increased teacher-student contact hours, lowering the size of the student-classroom ratio, ensuring supply of trained Science, Mathematics, and English language teachers, periodic teachers training and quality inspection, adequate lab facilities, playground and extra-curricular activities, accountability to the local

community and to parents. A particularly recurrent theme in these consultations was the issue of inappropriate functioning of the School Management Committees (SMCs).

3.15 Most participants voiced serious dissatisfaction over the quality of health services available at upazilla and district hospitals. Doctor absenteeism, inadequate nursing services, poor quality pathological tests, lack of adequate diagnostic facility, overcrowding, lack of maintenance and unclean environment, lack of attention to the patients, lack of sensitivity to women patients, rising hidden costs involved in availing public services were some of the problems mentioned during the consultations. The consultations stressed the need for greater utilisation of the existing *Union Health and Family Welfare Centre* (UHFWC) and Thana Health Complex (THC) as the most urgent imperative. The consultations recommended that every union should have a functioning UHFWC and every thana an effective THC for greater impact on curative health of the rural population. Strengthened preventive public health measures such as improved and safe water supply and hygienic sanitation were also seen important in reducing disease transmission and relieving burden on curative health services.

3.16 The general view of both pre-and post-draft consultations was in favor of an effective local government playing a critical role in the delivery of both public education and health programs at the community level. Accordingly, the consultations advocated the *inclusion and mainstreaming* of the local government responsibility in a major way in the future policies of the Government on public health and education, bringing it to the center stage of decentralized development.

3.17 Bangladesh's health program is enriched by the contributions made by NGOs. The discussion in general envisaged a greater role for NGOs as provider of educational and health services in rural and peri-urban areas both as sources of alternative finance and as mobilizing agents. An enhanced role for NGOs as provider of primary and secondary education--beyond their traditional focus on non-formal primary education—was suggested during consultations with the poor. Similarly, the consultations rated positively the delivery of curative health care services by the NGOs at secondary and tertiary levels, i.e., beyond its traditional role as provider of primary health care. Thus, suggestions were made that the relatively successful experience of Family Health Clinic providing curative services may be extended to all thanas. The NGOs were also seen as important players in the implementation of the Community Health Clinic (CHC) program, community empowerment projects, VGD, advocacy programs and women's empowerment through employment.

3.18 In general, the grass-roots consultations advocated higher allocations to education and health for financing quality services, on the one hand, and indicated the need for greater involvement of the local government in the overall supervision and management of these sectors.

3.19 The concerns expressed over the quality of public services were not restricted to education and health sectors. The urban consultations revealed equally serious concerns regarding other basic social services such as poor housing and sanitation, deteriorating quality of water, irregular power supply, poorly maintained roads and culverts, long

waiting period as well as poor quality of telephone services, cumbersome billing facilities, and rising hidden costs in getting access to basic public services. Municipal services were rated very poor. In rural consultations an additional concern related to poor quality of agricultural extension services, especially with respect to promoting new production technology and marketing skills in the area of vegetable cultivation, poultry and livestock rearing, and fish cultivation.

### ***Coordination among Development Agencies and Institutions***

3.20 The consultations revealed the need for forging greater coordination among diverse stakeholders functioning at the local level such as various government agencies and departments, NGOs and CBOs. The potential areas of development cooperation encompass the entire spectrum of service delivery involving agriculture, livestock, fishery, education, health, nutrition, disaster mitigation, social safety net, microcredit, and social mobilization. A particularly disturbing aspect has been the lack of coordination of development activities among the NGOs themselves, leading to fragmentation of efforts, duplication and wastage, and lack of synergies.

### ***Remunerative Employment and Economic Opportunities***

3.21 A considerable part of consultations was devoted to ways and means to accelerate the pace of income-poverty reduction. The discussion pointed out the beneficial effects of rice-based new technology and stressed the importance of developing such technology for unfavorable environments. The consultations noted the impressive growth of poultry and fishery sub-sectors. Within non-agriculture, the development of road and marketing linkages and the attendant growth of transport, trading, and service sector employment were highlighted. The need for developing employment-generating sectors such as agro-processing and information-technology (IT) related industry for both domestic economy and export markets was emphasized. The role of information technology was viewed as important for generating employment for the graduates in both rural and urban areas.

3.22 The consultations at the divisional headquarters further identified the need for exploring the full potentials of sub-regional and regional cooperation. The participants emphasized the need for greater access to the regional and sub-regional markets and suggested a pro-active policy for developing trade-related infrastructure, pressing in international and regional fora for removal of non-trade barriers, and greater trade creations.

### ***Physical Infrastructure***

3.23 The consultations strongly emphasized the role of physical infrastructure in accelerating the rate of poverty reduction, especially in rural areas. The package includes eleven important elements: road, bridge, railway, waterway, safe water supply and sanitation, electricity, gas, storage, port, telecommunication, and information. The consultations underscored the need for expanding further the network of all-weather feeder roads in rural areas and drew attention to the problem of maintenance. The neglected areas of railways and waterways received particular attention, especially from the viewpoint of environment-friendliness of these modes of transport. The growth

impact of electricity through its cost-reducing effects on use of irrigation equipment was emphasized. In addition, its direct impact on modernization of rural industry, contribution to longer working hours for commercial enterprises, along with favorable influence on social development was mentioned. The consultations stressed the importance of developing adequate storage facilities at the thana level, especially in promoting increasing commercialization of agriculture (vegetables, poultry, and fishery products). The critical importance of developing adequate and efficient port facilities figured prominently in consultations at divisional headquarters. The consultations strongly emphasized the need for extending telephone networks to rural areas and advocated greater competition and privatization in this area. Telecommunication would help in regional market integration and increase the effectiveness of the early-warning system for preventing disasters. Availability of information technology at the local level was advocated from the perspective of improving the overall system of governance as well. The post-draft consultations especially drew attention to the need for sensitiveness to the gender dimension in planning and designing infrastructure projects. Examples range from women and disabled-friendly transport system, installation of toilets for women in bus and railway stations, childcare facilities in workplaces, and similar measures. Building codes should also be designed to address the needs of the disabled.

### ***Other Issues***

3.24 The grass-roots consultations pointed out several issues, which demand additional attention. Thus, broad concern was expressed over the tendency of *regionally unbalanced development*, highlighting the widening gaps between infrastructurally advantaged and disadvantaged areas. The problems of environmentally fragile settings such as hill areas, char areas, river-erosion areas, salinity and flood-prone areas received particular attentions in this regard. An important area of concern was the *lack of adequate participation* of diverse categories of socially vulnerable groups such as those residing in ecologically vulnerable areas, such as cyclone-prone coastal areas and char and river-bank erosion areas, the tribal and the hill people, specific social categories such the disabled, women-headed households, and those engaged in marginal occupations. Another important issue was the need for *developing social solidarity* at the community level. While a plethora of poor people's organizations such as micro-finance groups and *samities* had emerged at the local level, the extent of cooperation across the poor communities and groups (the bonding and bridging aspect) was considered low undermining a potential important source of faster poverty reduction and social development. The consultations also pointed to the persistent *problem of polarized politics*, lack of cooperation, mutual respect and trust among major political parties, lack of democratization of the political parties and processes acting as serious constraints on economic and social progress. A particular concern was expressed over the continued expression of 'social poverty' indicating in some areas and contexts the still continuing presence of general obscurantism, attitude of conformism and fatalism, ignorance and prejudices, and the persistence of a mindset against change.

### **C. Summary Points**

3.25 Broad-based consultations around the issue of poverty reduction strategy have confirmed several aspects of progressive gains in the broad sphere of poverty reduction and social development over the past two decades. However, these have also indicated the fragility of the past success, suggested the points of worrying slippage and underscored the salient moments of regress. The latter relates to the following areas of citizen concerns: lack of physical infrastructure; law and order situation amidst incidence of organized crimes, extortion and economic violence; lack of effective local government and decentralization; poor quality of education, health, safe water supply and environmental sanitation, and other social services; lack of coordination among development agencies and institutions operating at the local level; lack of remunerative employment and economic opportunities; lack of social capital at the community level resulting in low-level of collective action; and lack of democratization of political processes.