

Making Development Meaningful: Disability Rights in Bangladesh

Shuchita Sharmin
Assistant Professor
Department of Development Studies
University of Dhaka
e-mail: shuchitas@gmail.com

Inclusive development

Development the century old debate had always been evolving in its focus. Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of 'development' or 'fostered development' barely existed. In 1949, Harry S. Truman in his inaugural speech as the president of the United States, naming the vast area of the world 'underdeveloped', identified the solution for them "modern scientific and technical knowledge of the developed". Consequently, the issue of *economic development* and poverty in the underdeveloped world became the international agenda. The modernization theory saw development as the 'process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems' created in Europe and the USA from the 17th century, [Eisenstadt, 1966]. The international institutional structures set up after the Second World War, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations, started working with the goal of modernizing the 'underdeveloped'. From the late 1960s focus shifted from economic growth to *understanding and addressing the national and local*. Later focus was on meeting *basic needs* and there after *participation in decision making, distributional issues*. After the debt crisis, in the mid to late 1970s there was a *return to growth-centric development*. In the 1980's the focus shifted to "structural adjustment", including *liberalization of trade, eliminating government deficits and overvalued exchange rates, and dismantling inefficient parasitical organizations*. However, *inequality, increased poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration re-emerged* in the era of globalization and became concern for development economists in the 1990s. The United Nations sponsored the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1995. Under a people-centered framework the governments in the summit urged a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for participatory social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy, mutual responsibility and cooperation, and full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people. Governments at the Summit acknowledged that primarily all the responsibilities are of states but positive

contribution or in other words cooperation of many other actors in the international community, including multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF are required. Finally, a set of refined development goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), identified at various international conferences and summits during the 1990s, were declared in the Millennium Summit that took place in September of 2000. In response to the impasse, the rhetoric of development is now focusing on the issue of poverty, with the metanarrative of modernization being replaced by shorter term vision embodied by the Millennium Development Goals.

The MDGs include eight goals, eighteen targets, and forty indicators. The MDGs, to be achieved by 2015, include:

- Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

Having achievement of Millennium Development Goals in the centre of present concern for developing countries, inclusive development is essential. For making MDG based national development meaningful, there is no alternative to including children, disabled, women and all different disadvantaged groups in the total development policy and process.

Diversity is a fact of life. Difference is normal. Some people are excluded from society because of difference. Difference can be due to a range of factors, some universal, some cultural and context specific. Inclusion is about society changing to accommodate difference, and to combat discrimination. It sees society as the problem, not the person. To achieve inclusion, a twin track approach is needed ;

- Focus on the society to remove the barriers that exclude. (mainstreaming)
- Focus on the group of persons who are excluded, to build their capacity and support them to lobby for their inclusion.

Inclusive Development therefore is the process of ensuring that all marginalized/excluded groups are included in the development process.

The former president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn (2002), said that “Unless disabled people are brought into the development mainstream, it will be impossible to cut poverty in half by 2015 or to give every girl and boy the chance to achieve a primary education by the same date – goals agreed to by more than 180 world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000.” It is certainly about inclusion of the disabled in the total development policy and process.

The reality is that children and women issues are to some extent there in the MDGs. But, there is no mention of disability in any of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) though for decades it is recognized that disability is a cause of poverty, that poverty often leads to disability and that disabled people are among the poorest of the poor in any country.

On disability: Bangladesh

Bangladesh has adopted the WHO definitions and classification of disability considering these definitions and classification most relevant and consistent with the country situation. The WHO’s global estimate predicts approximately 10% of all people have a disability of one kind or another. This is also considered to be true in Bangladesh with some sources quoting a higher disability rate in rural Bangladesh (VHSS. Country Profile Study on Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh. March 2000). The available data and information of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 1998), based on health and medical perspective, proportional prevalence of disability/impairment of different categories at all ages are visual 31.3%, physical (including leprosy and goiter) 35.8%, hearing and speech 28% and Mental Retardation 4.9%.

Before 1990s the disability issue as perceived today, was almost nonexistent in the context of Bangladesh. The initiatives of establishing schools for mentally retarded children, of the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), and some other organizations show that there had been some work but with specific kinds of disabilities, i.e. mental retardation, blind, hearing impaired, etc. Haqq in 1994, reported that “Educational provision for disabled children is limited. The Government runs 13 institutions in which 820 students (410 hearing impaired, 360 visually

impaired and 50 mentally handicapped) are studying. These are all residential schools, each with a further 20 day students”.

The following table provides the disability related policies and Act undertaken in Bangladesh.

Table 1. Bangladesh Policy and Developments

1993 National Coordination Committee on Disability established under the Ministry of Social Welfare
1995 National Policy on Disability approved outlining guidelines for prevention, identification, education, rehabilitation, research and management of the national program
1996 Action Plan on Disability approved outlining the plan for the implementation of the National Policy - this plan has not yet been fully implemented
2000 National Foundation for the Development of Disabled Persons (NFDDP) established under the Ministry of Social Welfare
2001 Disability Welfare Act passed by Bangladesh Parliament

Source: Bangladesh Protibandhi Kallyan Somity

In Bangladesh, the Disability Welfare Act of 2001 acknowledges the concerns of people with disabilities. This legislation can on the one hand be “considered as a milestone”, yet on the other “has been recognised as having various limitations and shortcomings” (www.apcdproject.org).

Though there had been National Five-Year and Two Year Plans earlier, the government of Bangladesh adopted the national poverty reduction instrument *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)*. The PRSP process in Bangladesh started in 2001. The country’s I-PRSP was published in March 2003, and the full version in October 2005. Planning Commission for PRSP Through there efforts NFOWD, Handicap International, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Save the Children UK, ActionAid and a few other organizations established the reality that the inclusion of disability is an issue that is not only important for the PRSP, but for development in general. The PRSP document now includes disability as a more or less cross-cutting issue, and includes a separate chapter of two pages about disability.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, and

opened for signature on 30 March 2007. Bangladesh is one of the 118 signatories to the convention.

Challenges on the way forward

Bangladesh has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1984, the UN Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (CAT) in 1998, seven of the eight fundamental International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions, etc. We are aware of the fate of those commitments. Thus signing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities poses question about the future possibilities.

The immediate possible challenges on the way are identified in the following discussion.

- Although disability is a major social and economic phenomenon in Bangladesh, there is very little reliable data available on this issue, especially in the absence of a comprehensive national survey on persons with disabilities (JICA, 2002). Disability related information i.e. causes, numbers, types of disability, etc. may be collected during census.
- Proper and sufficient address of disability issue in the PRSP is necessary.
- The laws must be in accordance with the convention; for UNCRC, still we find inconsistency regarding the age of a child. Such inconsistencies must be addressed not only for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but for all other signed conventions.
- To ensure the implementation, many actions by the GoB and by the NGOs are required, that need proper planning and initiative at the beginning. The organizations working in this field, as could show their competence before, have to come forward now.

Nasir-ur-Rahman Sinha (2006). Identified the basic challenges facing the poor countries like Bangladesh. He wrote:

- Access to education - less than two per cent of disabled children in poor countries attend school.

- Access to rehabilitation, aid and appliances - only about two per cent of disabled people in poor countries receive rehabilitation service that they require.
- Poverty - in general, disabled people are the poorest of the poor. According to World Bank estimates, one in five of world's poorest people are disabled, and most of them fall within low and middle-income groups.
- Attitudes and negative stereotypes - these are commonly attached to disability that often leads to discrimination and social exclusion.

Before these realities, the aim is to look forward and keeping the promise we are making. Can we achieve the short-term visions embodied by the Millenium Development Goals?

I also believe in what Mark Harrison (2006/7) wrote, “Disability is on the development agenda, however there is little evidence that it has got off the page. All the efforts and funding have yet to make a significant positive impact on the lives of poor disabled people in the South – there is still much work to be done at all levels of the development process”.

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