

An Attitudinal Survey

**Assessing Attitudes of the
'Change Makers' of Bangladesh,
Towards Issues of Extreme Poverty**



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Finally, we empathize with the sufferings and hardships of the extreme poor who have inadequate realisation of their rights. Hopefully **shiree** is able to increase the overall understanding and sensitivity towards those in extreme poverty.

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1.0 Aims

The purpose of this study is to;

- Begin the process of cataloguing the perceptions of elite groups in Bangladesh towards extreme poverty and current attempts to eliminate it;
- Inform an extensive future study into elite views of extreme poverty in Bangladesh;
- Start the process of developing a strategy for **shiree** to engage with these 'change makers' on issues of extreme poverty.

2.0 Background: The poverty situation in Bangladesh

Since its independence, Bangladesh has received substantial international development assistance, resulting in many groundbreaking ideas and approaches for development. Despite this, however, nearly half the population of Bangladesh live without access to basic necessities and services.

For instance, estimates put 40% of the population as living below the poverty line (consuming less than 2,122 calories a day). According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, poverty has increased continuously since independence reaching a peak in 1982. Poverty figures have since decreased from 58.8% in 1992 to 49.8% in 2000 (GoB: 2004). However, some studies suggest that there is a huge gap between the official headcount and the situation on the ground, arguing that in real terms poverty in Bangladesh is even more widespread (Sobhan, 1998). With per capita income of US\$ 370, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the Human Development Index, prepared by UNDP, Bangladesh ranks 145 on the list according to income, life expectancy and education.

Even among poor people there is a vast difference in the severity of poverty which they experience. Half of the poor, for instance, live in extreme vulnerable situations. BRAC calls these people the 'hardcore poor' while **shiree** refers to them as the 'extremely poor'.

Since 1971, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has placed significant emphasis on efforts to alleviate poverty, through policy guidelines and extending the services of departments into the rural areas. In addition, the anti-poverty programmes of the GoB have over the last three decades extended to include a number of important development programmes designed to reach the rural poor, especially vulnerable women, through the creation of jobs and other social support. Although poverty alleviation has been a priority for successive governments, it has nevertheless failed to reach the 'extreme poor' (30-35% of the population) with poverty alleviation interventions benefiting the poor but failing to reach the poorest of the poor (Sarkar and Rehman, 2006). In a workshop that brought together key stakeholders to discuss strategies for poverty alleviation, the issues of corruption, bad governance, confrontational politics, disregard for the rule of law, infrastructure bottlenecks and

government's low implementation capacity were all raised as hindering factors for effective development¹.

shiree believes that extreme poverty has to be tackled using a range of approaches, both directly through grassroots interventions (scale and innovation funds), and indirectly using macro level interventions to remove the structural obstacles preventing sustainable escape from poverty. Removing those obstacles requires pro-poor government policies. Because of this, shiree's strategy is to engage with 'change-makers' to begin to place elimination of extreme poverty at the centre of development efforts in Bangladesh.

3.0 Involving the change makers and elites: Why they are important

A number of studies (Hossain & Moore 2005, Sarkar & Rehman 2006) have shown that while government acknowledges the extreme levels of poverty experienced by large groups of the population, it often lacks a full understanding of that poverty and how to eliminate it. Policies to tackle poverty are often fragmented, mismanaged and funds misallocated (and sometimes misappropriated). The lack of ineffective management and implementation of government policies for poverty alleviation is supplemented by the indifferent attitude or misperception of poverty by the change-makers within the society; often referred to as the elite. Due to these gaps between policy and implementation, and perception and reality, **shiree** feels that a thorough understanding of the attitudes of elites is an important step to ensuring effective pro-poor policies.

The role of civil society has been considerable in the struggle against poverty. UNDP recognises civil society to be a combination of NGOs, community-based, tribal and religious groups, academics, researchers and professional organisations (UNDP: 1995). Civil society is influential in ensuring a community's capacity to participate in, and benefit from, development activities. It should however, function alongside the state and private sector and not in place of them (Hye: 2000). Furthermore, Rehman et al (2000) argue that a strong civil society is important for good governance, being one of the prerequisites for democracy by providing checks and balances on state power and the excesses of the private sector. The most effective poverty alleviation strategies then, need to have coordination and synergies among the state, civil society, and the private sector.

The elite are frequently considered to be more part of the problem of extreme poverty than the solution (Reis & Moor 2005). Therefore it is crucial to understand their attitudes towards extreme poverty. The elite however, are largely isolated from the extreme poor by geography and lifestyle. A key question then, is if the elite are so insulated from the conditions of extreme poverty do, or can, they have the necessary knowledge, understanding and inclination to act as 'trustees' on behalf of extremely poor people through influencing policies?

¹ " Donors for anti-poverty action plan till elections", Daily star: 17 Nov 2005

On the whole, there is little understanding of the sensitivity and attitudes of the elites about extreme poverty other than that they can play an important role in its elimination. De swaan et al. for instance, talk about the 'social consciousness' which must develop among the elite to drive collective political action forward in favour of the poor (2000 in Hossain 2005). This social consciousness calls upon the elites to recognise the interdependence which exists between the two opposite ends of the society; an understanding that ultimately the well off cannot be protected from the negative impacts of widespread poverty on their own well-being and to acknowledge they have a responsibility for the poor and that they have effective means to tackle poverty. These realisations can and have indeed helped the Victorian Britain, to mobilise the elite in favour of the poor.

Hossain's (2005) research aimed at understanding the attitudes of the Bangladeshi elite about poverty. She suggests that the elite are under no illusion about the extent of poverty in Bangladesh with about 75% of interviewees estimating that more than half the population live in poverty. They conceptualise poverty as being unable to fulfil your most basic needs, and that the majority of poor people live in rural areas. In Hossain's analysis of the perception of the elite of the rural poor, she suggests the rural dwellers are romanticised as being 'honest, moral people struggling against harsh odds and natural disasters'. Similarly, the urban poor are perceived as being moral and honest and have been forced out of their rural homeland.

Logically the urban elite should understand urban poverty more than rural poverty, because of their proximity to it. Hossain's work argues that in urban areas there is 'no fear that poverty might have negative impacts of elite welfare through transmission of diseases or social unrest'. This lack of threat perceived by the elites is exactly the reason why they don't see poverty as an immediate priority. For instance, while 26% of the elites interviewed saw some connection between urban poverty and crime they felt that this crime was too petty to directly affect them.

Hossain argues this lack of urgency is very much evident in the kinds of action favoured to combat poverty; most being 'developmental in nature' and not involving an immediate attack through activism or collective action. Hossain further argues that as Bangladeshi's are relatively homogenised due to their Independence, language and culture there exists little social and religious distinction between the rich and the poor. Because of this she believes that there is great potential for 'vigorous anti-poverty measures on the grounds of national solidarity'. She advocates that there are measures which can be taken to instigate the 'social consciousnesses' of the Bangladeshi elite in favour of the poor.

4.0 Methodology

This study used qualitative semi-structured interviews in an attempt to understand the perceptions of the elite towards extreme poverty. People selected for interview were individuals considered to be 'the elite' in society. They were identified because of their;

- contribution to public life,
- public profile to instigate change,
- potential to influence the decision-makers in anti-poverty programmes and policies,

- ability to gain support for, and to develop an awareness raising programme envisaged by, **shiree**.

In total 22 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours. The interviews included open-ended questions to gauge, broadly, the interviewees understanding and sensitivity to issues of extreme poverty. The opening questions discussed debates around extreme poverty, followed by specific questions about their perceptions of extreme poverty. This strategy was adopted as most actors interviewed had affiliations with certain organisations, and it was thought to be problematic to separate their own views from that of their organisation.

5.0 Findings: The attitudes of the elites on extreme poverty

The research findings are given according to the occupation of the interviewee. A summary of the key points is followed by a more in-depth presentation of their opinions.

5.1 Researchers

- Define extreme poverty as multi-dimensional and culturally and socially embedded. Both qualitative and quantitative indicators should be used to define extreme poverty and to measure escape from it. Measuring upward mobility requires indicators on: employment, access to safety networks, assets, and human capital.
- Varying definitions of extreme poverty by key actors leads to the poorest people often not receiving all the possible support.
- Rural dwellers are worse off because they live in hard to reach areas, making development programmes inaccessible. Urban extreme poverty also exists with higher disposable income but a lower standard of living.
- GoB has failed to undertake coherent policies to tackle poverty alleviation and does not take account of the opinions of experts.
- The PRSP exists to permit GoB to manage aid and was largely devised with 'prescriptions' from donor groups, particularly the World Bank
- The ODA received by Bangladesh has been under-utilised due to the weak structure of the State including poor inter-Ministerial coordination.
- NGOs should also subscribe to a notion of 'intensification, rather than diversification' to ensure programme success and a sustainable impact.
- Agents of Change: Civil society and the media must work together to raise awareness and maintain checks and balances in policies. It was felt their role was a 'concentration of politics'- dictated by politicians, implying that they have little power for change.

Researchers, then, stressed the need for the definition of poverty to be more precise while at the same time for development efforts to be holistic and multi-dimensional. They highlight that the GoB, NGOs and think tanks all identify different people as extremely poor, often leading to the households most in need not receiving all the potential support. They also advocate clear definitions on the various degrees of poverty through adopting qualitative and quantitative indicators. The distinction

between the seasonal extreme poverty and chronic extreme poverty, for instance, was mentioned as a conceptual gap in our understanding of poverty.

As a whole, there was consensus that the people most affected by extreme poverty are rural dwellers. One individual supported his view by citing the remoteness of rural settings, where development programmes often fail to reach. It is urban poverty however which was identified by a few researchers as something neglected in the development discourse. One individual stated that;

“in actual reality, the urban poor live in a lot worse conditions than the rural poor, their disposable income is higher, but the means of making a better life for them are limited as they live in cramped housing in unhygienic conditions, and constantly in fear of eviction”.

The researchers' view of the GoB was somewhat cynical but mostly hopeful. The government was perceived to be 'deceptive', saying the right things at the right time in order to retain power, only to fail on promises, especially to the extreme poor. Others saw government as ill-informed because of the gap between research-based knowledge and policy making. One researcher, who worked for an institution that was created for the purpose of informing the government, felt that there was little real dialogue between researchers and policy makers.

As a whole, researchers thought that international development assistance to Bangladesh has been substantial since its independence. But, it was felt that the GoB had not been able to utilise these funds effectively due to lack of capacity. NGOs were perceived as taking significant strides forward on issues of women's empowerment and education and they believed such initiatives had been a great success. However, other programmes such as asset transfers in rural settings were indirectly creating disincentives to send children to school and become labourers with an increasing number of productive assets requiring more labour to generate returns from them. Because of this it was believed that conditionality should be attached to asset transfers, ensuring that the children stay in school such as through providing stipends for education.

This group also expressed the view that NGOs should subscribe to 'intensification rather than diversification' in their programmes in order to ensure effective service delivery. It was felt that some NGOs spread themselves too thin and as a result have little success in implementing effective development programmes. Respondents also cited lack of local ownership of development projects as a major cause of failure and gave many cases where development gains could not be sustained once a project ended.

Researchers identified the agents of change as the media and civil society. They felt that these two must work side by side to raise awareness of extreme poverty and to keep society and the GoB in check. Some researchers felt that the politicians were not 'sensitive' to the conditions of the extreme poor, because the poor were not mobilised and so the GoB does not take them seriously.

5.2 Civil Society

- Diverse definitions of extreme poverty including: female headed households with 4/5 kids, households with few sources of income and those consuming less than 2 meals a day.
- Some stress the interdependence between the moderate and extreme poor while others outright reject conventional development approaches as they objectify the poor and make them dependent through a culture of handouts.
- View the GoB as committed to poverty alleviation on paper but lacking effective implementation and genuine commitment.
- Public institutions need to be autonomous, free from politicisation and elite-centric focus in order to serve the needs of the majority (poor). Agrarian policies need to be focused to help the poor but the GoB should not implement development initiatives.
- Agents of change: such as civil society and students should raise awareness in society of people's rights and hold the GoB and NGOs alike accountable.
- Policies need to be monitored and made accountable at all levels.

Members of civil society define extreme poverty in diverse ways. Some understand extreme poverty to be female headed households, with four to five children, able only to achieve a basic hand to mouth income and consuming less than 2 meals a day. They believe that these extremely poor households were not able to afford the time to attend community development meetings.

Others in the group answered the question from social and economic perspectives, suggesting the difference between the extreme and moderate poor is not only statistical but also social. They saw the former as a heterogeneous group while the moderate poor were a homogenous group. The issue was raised that these two groups have a relationship of interdependency which is often ignored by development programmes. For instance, when a moderately poor person receives credit it tends to increase competition with the extreme poor who may not have access to credit. The nature of interdependency between the moderately poor and the extreme poor was believed to be a grey area in development programmes, requiring more research.

Some members of civil society argued that assets, stipends, market support, basic health and education services were needed by the extreme poor to enable them to move to moderately poor levels. Only then can they take advantage of micro-credit schemes. Others, who subscribed to the theories of self-reliance and community development, said the extreme poor needed the opportunity to see themselves as the authors of their own development. Insecurity was another aspect mentioned, including food, shelter and livelihoods. Marginal land owners and landless rural dwellers were also identified as people who need support, to ensure they do not fall into the extreme poor category due to shocks induced by market failure, political and social upheavals and natural disasters.

Development organisations were seen to have good intentions, but it was felt that large NGOs such as BRAC had to compliment these efforts to make them effective. When trying to reach the extreme poor, it was felt that programmes such as the

micro-credit did not reach them due to constant insecurities that they faced. Some felt, the extreme poor needed assets, and assistance in managing the assets, to enable them to take advantage of micro-credit.

Others felt that these initiatives do not reach the extreme poor affectively at all. For example, even building physical infrastructure does not provide benefits for the poorest people as they lack financial/physical resources to take advantage of it. Once again it was believed that these benefits only reached the moderately poor, and may even worsen conditions for the extreme poor. Before the investment in physical infrastructure or micro-credit schemes the extreme poor may have been able to compete in the market at some level. However, as the moderately poor take advantage of development efforts, their efficiency increases, thus forcing out and creating barriers of entry in the market for the extreme poor.

Others out rightly deny the effectiveness of conventional development programmes, saying they make the poor dependent; even when a person receives credit or an asset, in the long run they still have to face the unpredictable market which can easily push them back into extreme poverty. Some people perceived development assistance to Bangladesh to be an extension of colonialism, prescribing a culture of 'we give, you take', increasing the dependence of extremely poor people on external agents.

The GoB is seen to prioritise the issue of extreme poverty in policy, but this priority is lacking in implementation. Some acknowledge that the GoB has initiated some useful programmes. For example, in the 1980s the GoB gave food rations to the extreme poor. This programme alone was not sustainable so BRAC stepped in and also gave employment training to these people. One economist referred to his theory of 'humpty dumpty'. When asked about the GoB, he said that the politicians were corrupt and lacked political will and that "*all the kings horses and all the king's men, cannot put the GoB back together again*". It was also stated that new leadership was required as it was pointless to expect the existing government body to redeem itself.

Most importantly, the need for health and educational institutions to become autonomous was identified as a key policy condition for continuity in social sector services. Others saw the GoB as being biased in favour of the rich, making it difficult for some NGOs to function, especially those working with *Khas* land. "*If only they stayed neutral, we could let the courts decide who deserves the land*". Another view expressed by this group was that the GoB needs to ensure people's security and their rights, including through agrarian and land reform. Otherwise, development initiatives both on the part of the state and NGOs will continue to be temporary safety nets instead of sustainable programs.

The first step towards achieving this goal is to strengthen local democracy. The union councils need to be made autonomous, which at the moment can be dismissed by government officials at will, while the right to information act should also be reformed so as not to exempt the military and businessmen. The perception of GoB by this group as a whole is that it controls the educated elite, the union councils, and favours the rich when it comes to agrarian reform. The GoB was not expected to change, but in the end it was felt that development initiatives needed to be

pursued in Bangladesh, regardless of the government support, and sometimes even in opposition to its policy.

Members of civil society also believe that the youth of Bangladesh have been left behind; that they need to be made aware of their role as citizens to advocate on behalf of extremely poor people. *Bangladeshis on the whole need an 'emancipated consciousness' to realise the realities of extreme poverty in Bangladesh*, one respondent said.

5.3 Businesspeople

- Define extreme poverty as a lack of basic necessities and the means to be upwardly mobile.
- GoB is committed on paper, allocating a lot of funds to poverty alleviation, but it lacks rigorous implementation, with efforts failing to reach the poor.
- While the GoB understands the issues on a macro scale, it cannot comprehend the realities of extreme poverty because it has no first-hand experience.
- GoB should attract businesses to move to rural areas via incentives such as tax breaks to create jobs for the rural dwellers.
- Development assistance has been successful with investment in physical infrastructure, but this effort has lacked in rural areas.
- Agents of Change: While they can do their bit by taking care of their workers, there needs to be action by the GoB and NGOs to work with businesses for instance to devise a programme which helps child workers to both work and attend school.

People in the world of business view extreme poverty as a condition of lacking both basic necessities and also the opportunities that are needed to improve your quality of life. Basic necessities include having a regular income, access to adequate healthcare facilities and basic human and social rights. There was a strong consensus that the rural population is the group most lacking these basic necessities.

Although the GoB prioritises interventions to eliminate extreme poverty and allocates substantial financial resources, businesspeople believe that this money often fails to reach those who are the poorest. They believe this is because of the lack of strong leadership within government and the presence of corruption. This group also expressed that there was a considerable lack of understanding by the government of what extreme poverty actually entails. One businessman said,

"The 'change-makers' have an understanding of the issues, but cannot comprehend the brutality of poverty."

He also expressed the difficulty in gaining this understanding as he said, even he,

"...cannot feel the pain of a hungry man, as I have never had to go hungry."

There was also agreement that some larger development efforts, such as investment into physical infrastructure, have been successful to some extent, but again lack of investment in marginalised rural areas has increased the number of rural-to-urban migrants. The group of businesspeople advocated that although as individuals they

can do their bit by looking after their employees (through higher wages and the transfer of assets), the government and NGOs alike need to play a greater role in incorporating rural communities into market based activities such as garment and textile production. Facilitating this type of action, through for example tax breaks for businesses that operate in rural areas, would remedy the problem of the vast inflow of rural poor into the cities by providing them with an increased and stable source of income in their own communities. Furthermore, they suggested that the government needs to encourage children in extremely poor families to attend educational facilities, in order to expand their outlook, through a combination of work/school programmes. Such a programme would allow children to continue to contribute to household expenditures while also gaining a basic primary education.

5.4 Academics

- Define extreme poverty to be a lack of basic necessities such as food education and as facing structural obstacles for upward mobility. The poorest groups include internally displaced people, failed migrants and the Bihari community.
- GoB commits to poverty alleviation but lacks effective implementation. It should target specialised groups.
- Post-independence, the influx of NGOs provided an easy option for the poor, providing them with handouts which created a culture of dependency in Bangladesh. NGO culture is now to get aid in the name of poverty.
- Agents of change include the GoB, which has huge scope and potential to bring about change through making better use of International Aid.
- Students should be encouraged by changing the curriculum to encourage better understanding of their society. Academics and researchers should break away from bureaucracy and undertake more active fieldwork to see extreme poverty first hand.

The perception of extreme poverty by academics revolves around lack of basic necessities of life, including food, education, justice and most importantly structural obstacles for upward mobility. A definition of extreme poverty provided by one academic included,

“People who do not even think that they have the right to basic rights, as they are so marginalized”.

In addition, it was outlined that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are worse off due to environmental risks and an unpredictable life. Other groups include failed migrants, who have managed to move out of poverty for a short time due to job contracts abroad (i.e. construction industry in the middle east), but are then pushed back into extreme poverty when they return to a life of debt and lack of a regular income. The urban poor are also noted as being neglected in the development programmes as the main focus has been on rural poverty, thus ignoring the vast rural-urban migration that is taking place creating large slums in urban areas.

They believe that the GoB should acknowledge the contribution these urban poor make to the economy and support them by providing with housing, education and health facilities. It was also felt that there was a misconception on the issues of poverty as the reliance on the relief efforts after independence has not truly

translated into long-term sustainability. Post-independence emergence of large NGOs created easy options for the poor to accept handouts without being the agents of their own change. The GoB was seen to prioritise issues of extreme poverty in key documents, such as the PRSP which was prepared through external assistance, but this group felt that the government lacks a sense of understanding and capacity to implement its own policies.

It was pointed out that these policies need to target special groups to better understand their issues in order to come up with suitable tailor-made approaches to help them. The PRSP was also seen to be largely drafted by international consultants, who are not fully aware of the full cultural context of extreme poverty in Bangladesh. The ministers were also said not to be involved in a constructive dialogue in the formulation of the PRSP and if they were, they would have a chance to learn and thus be more proactive. The NGO culture in Bangladesh has been outlined as obtaining funds in the name of poverty, without understanding the historical and cultural aspects.

Others felt that GoB did not see it to be useful to ensure rights for the extreme poor of Bangladesh. For example, the government has diminished the scope and voice of trade unions, attracted foreign investment to the country through vast quantities of cheap labour which in turn facilitates economic growth. It was suggested that NGOs should work to mobilise trade unions in partnership with civil society. However, it was also said that the existing civil society was also controlled by political parties creating an obstacle for trade unions to mobilise and demand their rights.

The GoB was felt to have the potential to make vast changes for the extreme poor through the effective use of international aid. However, some believed that in the last few decades this had been a huge failure. Others felt that the researchers also lacked an understanding, because they were 'armchair researchers', by not conducting their own research in the field, thus they lacked observation learning. In addition, academics agreed that students were motivated to be trained to get good jobs, not to be good citizens.

Academics stated that the curriculum designed within the country taught the students not to ask any questions from an early age, and change of the curriculum was made impossible due to the numerous levels of bureaucracy. The whole schooling system (up to a postgraduate level) was designed to homogenise student learning. It was expressed that the academics and professors should break away from bureaucracy and support teachers their students to be aware of the issues of extreme poverty in their country.

5.5 Media

- Define extreme poverty to include those who are landless, trapped in debt, without kinship networks and consume less than 1700 calories..
- GoB was seen as having done very little since independence due to lack of political will and motivation.
- Some thought that development assistance had little to show for in the last 30 years. Others felt it had been successful in rural areas, and should now focus on urban poverty where many of the extreme rural poor had migrated to.

Others believed that rural extreme poverty was still an area that needed further assistance i.e. agrarian reform.

- Agents of change were identified to be the poor; they needed to mobilise to demand their rights. The media was also seen as a powerful medium but lacked a rounded understanding of issues of extreme poverty.
- GoB also needs to introduce societal/political and economic reform, create incentives for businesses to move to rural areas and on a macro scale to explore other industries besides agriculture and garments.

The media perceive a person living in extreme poverty to be landless, trapped in cycles of debt, without any kinship-based safety networks and who frequently consume below the recommended daily calorie intake.

However, while some believed that rural development efforts had been extremely successful, leaving the extreme poor in predominantly urban areas, others understood the extreme poor to be mostly rural subsistence farmers locked in a vicious cycle of poverty. The media believed that the GOB has done little to combat the issue of extreme poverty since independence as a result of a lack of political will and motivation.

Areas of particular concern are the relatively small amount of money being invested in facilitating inputs for rural farmers, as well as the ever growing number of landless people resulting in increased rural-to-urban migration. Also the privatization and liquidation of key institutions, such as the Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC), which provided vital information for rural farmers on inputs, has been a contributing factor in the growth of the number of extreme poor. The presence and effectiveness of NGOs was also questioned as they were believed to have helped little in the last 30 years to alleviate extreme poverty.

However, some media professionals did believe that the role of NGOs has been strongly beneficial in rural areas and that is what has forced the extreme poor to migrate to urban settings. There was however a general consensus that the extreme poor need to mobilize in order to voice their concerns, creating a pathway to obtaining resources from the government and other bodies such as donor organisations. However, one media professional stated that,

"...they are unorganised and seldom have the leverage to secure basic rights and resources from the public sector..."

There was also general agreement that the media was not doing enough to help the extreme poor for reasons including the misconception of the concepts of poverty and lack of motivation.

The media advocated the need for the GoB to introduce societal, political and economic reforms; placing the extreme poor at their focus. The government also needs to sensitize the private sector to the issue of extreme poverty and provide it with incentives to operate in rural areas. Only through these activities could some form of industry start to emerge. Some people suggested that the government needs to prioritize investment in several key areas which would have a direct impact on the lives of the extreme poor, such as agriculture, education and family planning. Others suggested expanding the IT sector.

5.6 Bureaucrats

- Define extreme poverty as multi-dimensional: including class and ethnicity indicators along with disabilities, environmental risks, hunger and assets.
- Development assistance was seen to be vast, and vibrant in Bangladesh. NGOs are able to reach remote areas and implement development programs.
- The group with more of an affiliation with the GoB felt they had to be monitored because they were not democratic.
- Agents of change were seen to be a joint effort between NGOs, GoB and civil society. On a whole, society had to be made aware of the conditions of the extreme poor, and the mental block removed.

The bureaucrats interviewed had mixed responses to questions. Some were very reluctant to give their own views, feeling that they needed to recount the views of the government because of their position. This group followed the PRSP, saying that it was the most accurate and important document about extreme poverty. Others felt more comfortable giving their own opinions and criticizing the GoB. They felt that the definition of extreme poverty should be multi-dimensional, accounting for characteristics, such as hunger, asset holdings, disabilities and environmental risks. International development definitions it was felt should also include class and ethnic minority dimensions.

There was a consensus that the government was in theory trying to prioritise issues of extreme poverty, but the policy feasibility was strongly in question. The 'change-makers' it was felt understood the issue at a macro scale, but this had not translated into success at a micro level. Others felt that the elite, the GoB and even society as a whole had grown too 'accustomed to extreme poverty'.

Some who felt the need to align themselves to the values of the government said that the GoB was accountable and transparent because it was democratically elected and that it was the NGOs that were not democratic and thus lacked any incentive to stay true to their target groups. This individual also felt that all the politicians had a complete understanding of the issues on the grass roots because they had field experience. It was also felt that Bangladesh was relatively better off within the region because the government had prioritised poverty issues right from independence. Others with less direct affiliation with the GoB felt that Bangladesh had progressed since its independence but real incomes had decreased when population growth was taken into account.

NGOs are perceived to be vibrant in Bangladesh, reaching remote areas where the state does not and improving the conditions of extremely poor people there. This group also believed that NGOs had been so successful because the GoB had allowed them to operate freely. As a whole, NGOs are perceived to be a positive influence, though there is a need for better coordination between the GoB, NGOs and Civil society in order to raise awareness among the elite and eliminate extreme poverty. This coordination would also decrease the gap between macro- and micro- level understandings as well as reduce the vacuum between policy and its implementation.

Both the GoB and NGOs need to be made accountable. This can be achieved through efforts of the government to raise the voice of citizens and improve their awareness of how to attain successful pro-poor policies.

5.7 Political Leaders

- Define extreme poverty as a lack of basic necessities: resources, assets and lack of access to development programmes.
- GoB and bureaucrats lack coordination and mutual understanding.
- Development programmes do not coordinate with GoB efficiently either. The PRSP is formulated by international consultants and politicians have little input. International consultants should listen to people's representatives.
- There is a lack of leadership in Bangladesh.

By and large, politicians appear to have a common understanding when it comes to identifying the extreme poor. They see extremely poor people as those who cannot meet their basic needs, have no access to resources, live in hard to reach areas and thus cannot take advantage of government or NGO services. They believe that there are still barriers within social and government structures that hinder the implementation of good policies. The bureaucracy does not respond to government influences, while at times government also does not realize the actual problem.

Other limitations pointed out are that most initiatives do not adequately consult local experts and poor people, while a large portion of the financial assistance goes to foreign consultants. It was also expressed, that coordination among development partners, government, politicians and bureaucrats is lacking. Even the process of drafting the PRSP does not include politicians adequately.

They agree that at present we do not have effective leadership. Most of the politicians are not sensitive to peoples' needs and demands. To them, people should be given the authority to decide what is best for them and development partners should consult with peoples' representatives more than researchers and NGOs.

6.0 Conclusions: Understandings of, and sensitivity to, extreme poverty

Elite perceptions of poverty reflect the diversity of individual opinions, as well as the perspective of their professions, education, exposure to national and international perspectives and some gut feelings. Taken together the views expressed by 'the elite' paint a broad picture of what lies at the roots of extreme poverty in Bangladesh.

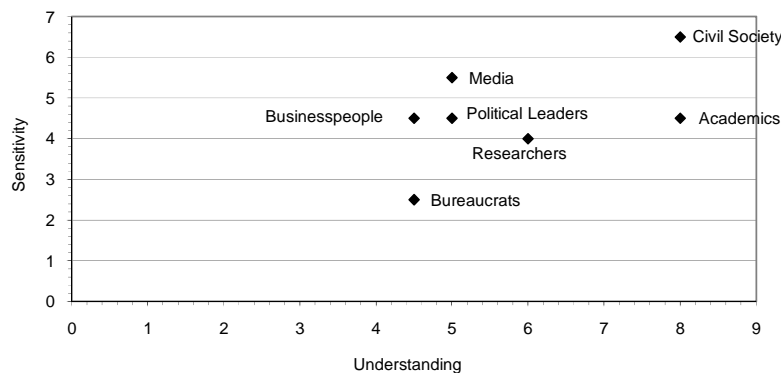
There is consistency in the definitions of poverty and extreme poverty put forward, though there are variations. Many are consistent with current literature but some are contextualised to Bangladesh. The major focus is on income poverty but social and rights related aspects are also recognised by most respondents.

The majority of the interviewees estimate that about half the population of Bangladesh lives in extreme poverty, similar to the findings of Hossain’s research. Extreme poverty is viewed largely as a rural phenomenon, but there is also acknowledgement of the seriousness of urban poverty. Many see a link between urban and rural poverty. There is a high degree of consensus on the causes of poverty. Poor governance comes out in one form or another as the main point of failure. Other causes of failure include missing out context specificity, lack of in-depth research, stakeholder consultation and also the gap between policy objectives and implementation capacity. Most groups recognize that although extreme poverty is a priority for the government, a lack of political will, sensitivity towards the extreme poor from the bureaucracy, and dependence on donors and large NGOs for poverty reduction has eroded the capacity of the state to play its primary responsibility.

The elite, or at least the elite representatives interviewed for this report, appear to be sufficiently sensitive to the issues of extreme poverty. Many of the respondents are active participants in research, practice or advocacy for poverty reduction and even those who are not directly involved in public interest activities, such as the business people are acutely aware of the problem and hold strong views on how to tackle the issue. The levels of understanding of the different elite groups both towards extreme poverty and interventions to address it, as well as their sensitivity and personal opinions about the extreme poor are presented in figure 1. More information about this figure is also given in Appendix 2.

Figure 1 shows that academics and civil society representatives have the greatest understanding of extreme poverty, with both of them having a certain degree of field-level experience combined with their theoretical knowledge. Sensitivity is a reflection of the perception of elites about what they themselves can and should do to address extreme poverty and whether they have in fact, advocated on behalf of extremely poor people.

Figure 1: Presenting the attitudes of different change makers towards the extreme poor



This study presents little evidence to suggest that the elites are somehow threatened by the poor. Most people are empathetic towards the urban poor, not mentioning any frustration about crime. One interviewee with a significant history of advocating on behalf of the rural poor even feels the urban poor are unduly harassed by law enforcement agencies despite regularly contributing to city corporation tax.

The interviews show a certain lack of urgency for tackling extreme poverty, as Hossain (2005) found in her research. The bureaucrats, for example, feel that the GoB is doing everything right and Bangladesh had continuously progressed as a result. Others however, express a desperate need for the GoB to play its role in enabling the right environment for private sector to prosper and ensuring transparency and accountability. Civil society, media, academics and researchers all seems to express a similar view, advocating the conditions of the extreme poor were worsening. Except for the business people and bureaucrats the priority of economic growth was not mentioned by others. Others generally advocate knowledge gaps between the government and researchers and a vacuum between a policy and its implementation.

While most solutions to address extreme poverty were 'developmental' or supply-side in nature, ranging from public sector reforms to targeted investments, improved research and better division of labour between government and NGOs. However, there are also strong views that advocate a need for collective action, such as community mobilisation and awareness creation among the poor themselves. Others feel the poor cannot mobilise if they are lacking basic necessities and it is the role of NGOs to help them gain those necessities. Still others advocate market-based solutions, rural industrialization and a culture of entrepreneurship rather than donor or state assisted development. Surprisingly, in a country that is a pioneer in microfinance and boasts a Nobel Laureate for that work, the opinion is divided on the effectiveness of micro credit as an instrument for poverty reduction. Another major point of disagreement is the role of NGOs, some advocating their role as paramount, while others blaming them for creating a culture of dependency and being part of the problem.

This study further shows that the elite do not hold the state in high regard, with the exception of the bureaucrats; almost all groups expressed a concern for high levels of corruption in the public sector. The GoB is seen to have a weak command of the state machinery; along with weak local institutions incapable of effectively using international assistance. This lack of confidence in the GoB was echoed by Hossain (2005).

The elites interviewed see themselves as doing their bit, and assign major responsibility to the state and NGOs. One notion expressed by the majority of the interviewees is that the majority development efforts do not reach the extreme poor, perhaps with the exception of a few sanitation programmes. Others suggest that the extreme poor are not able to take advantage of micro-credit schemes due to the risks and uncertainties they face and thus must be given assets, accompanied by a market support, with a stipend until they started making a return. This is perhaps the biggest criticism of the development community in the last decade in Bangladesh.

However, while there is sensitivity and understanding about the issues of poverty, there is also a lack of ownership with most interviewees naming other actors as

responsible for what is going wrong; this was either the state, NGOs, international development organisations or civil society. This is perhaps the biggest hindrance to developing a 'social consciousness'. On the one hand the elite are aware of their interdependency with the poor and that they have the means to improve the condition of the poorest people. However, on the other hand, they do not feel threatened by the poor and feel that to eliminate poverty more effectively requires improvements in the ideas and activities of people other than themselves.

7.0 Recommendations

This preliminary study was conducted to get a sense of the perceptions of Bangladesh's elite about the state of poverty and what can be done to reduce it. The results show a great deal of interest and anxiety, but no clear answers. The main recommendation therefore is to probe further, through an extensive study, to establish patterns in the thought processes of those who are fortunate enough not to be poor, but are surrounded by widespread poverty. The outcome of this research should then be compared with studies done on the perceptions of the poor themselves to put the spotlight from the two extreme angles.

This study lacked a gender neutral understanding with the number of women interviewed being less than half. It is suggested that the follow up study interviews more women to gain a more balanced view.

8.0 Bibliography

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Annex 1

Matrix

	DEFINITION	GOB	NGOS/DONORS	THEIR ROLE	AGENTS OF CHANGE
Researchers	- Multi-dimensional-culturally embedded. Qualitative and quantitative indicators.	- misinformed, no coordination with researchers. - PRSP-means of managing aid. Determinant on International prescriptions.	- Substantial- but weak 'state-machinery' not utilised it properly. Asset transfers have negative consequences. NGOs should specialise. (comparative advantage)	- Controlled by politics and politicians alike. - Must work to strength the channel between researchers and GoB.	- Media and civil society- to keep the checks on the GoB. - To raise awareness about the issues of extreme poverty, in the aim to sensitise the change-makers.
Business Persons	-Lack basic necessities-upward mobility.	-lacks affective implementation of policies.	- build rural infrastructure to reduce rural-urban migration.	- take care of workers, but facilitating agent important	- GoB - create incentives for buss to move to rural areas-rural jobs.
Civil Society	- Female HHs -Interdependency b/w Moderate & extreme poor. Definitions objectify the poor 'self-development'	- Lacks implementation-corruption, not pro-poor. Controls institutions and educated elite. i.e. lawyers, doctors. -Politicians cannot be made honest-'humpty-dumpty.	- Most programmes don't reach the extreme poor especially micro-credit- it reaches the moderate poor which worsens extreme poverty. -culture of dependency.	- create an 'emancipated consciousnesses. Development efforts will/have continue with or without GoB support.	- Civil society and students must mobilise and keep the checks and balance on the GoB.
Political	Lack of basic	GoB-Bureaucrats lack	do not coordinate with	Monitor and keep	Donors should work

Leaders	necessities i.e. assets.	coordination.	politicians (people's representatives)	NGOs accountable.	with them.
Academics	Lack of basic necessities+ minorities i.e. biharis, IDP & failed migrants.	Lacks affective implementation. Should specialise on certain areas- target groups.	Post independence-created easy option for the poor through hand-out. NGO culture of getting funds in the name of poverty-making poor dependent!	Break away from bureaucracy and encourage students to become better citizens by being sensitive to extreme poverty in the country, as opposed to just get good jobs.	- 'arm-chair researchers'- should do own field work to learn. - Student through mobilisation.
Media	Landless, debt and without kinship networks- intake of less than 1700 calories.	Lacks political will-not motivated by bureaucrats. Privatising institutions-worsening extreme poverty.	- Little to show for last 30 years. Successful in rural areas, should focus on urban now.	- should work to raise awareness about extreme poverty, and sensitise audience.	- GoB creates societal/economic reform i.e. agrarian.
Bureaucrats	Class & ethnic group, environmental risk etc. PRSP is the most imp document.	GoB grasps extent of poverty on a macro-scale but not on micro-levels- grown accustomed to poverty. GoB- driver of change- let NGOs succeed.	Vast & vibrant. NGO able to reach remote areas. Not democratic so GoB must monitor them and keep accountable.	Strengthen partnership and coordination with NGOs, GoB and civil society.	State and non-state actors should work together to sensitise society, about issues of extreme poverty-encourage collective action.

Annex 2

Presenting the Understanding and Sensitivity levels of the different Change-makers

The scatter diagram was devised by weighing different aspects of the interview. Calculating the understanding of issues of extreme poverty, based on qualitative data required a breakdown into different areas of the groups discussed. The definition of extreme poverty weighed 2 points and was the starting point for all interviews to come to a common ground about which group the study referred to (extreme poor, bottom 10%).

Understanding of GoB development interventions weighed 2 points to access if the interviewee had a comprehensive insight into the workings, the limitations and the potential of the state. Development intervention weighed 2 points and included perceptions of donor, NGOs and development practices. Agent of change weighed 2 points and was an element added to get an insight of who the interviewee saw as the change maker (the poor, or the policy makers).

All the above segments weighed equal points as they were seen to be equally important in attaining development goals. Personal judgment weighed only 1 point because the above component gave a comprehensive insight into the interviewee's understanding, therefore personal judgement valued less. Calculating sensitivity was trickier as direct question would not equate to the sensitivity level.

Therefore examples of advocacy and sense of ownership were used to assess this. The interviewees sense of ownership weighed 3 points as this was seen as a major push factor to attain desired change, this was assessed on the basis, if they saw themselves as responsible citizen to bring about this change, and if so how they could and would do so.

Evidence of advocacy, or works done to bring about the change expressed weighed 3 points, this tied in with their sense of ownership thus equally valued and weighed. Personal accounts expressed in talking about different components of extreme poverty weighed 2 points; these gave some grounding in grass-root level understanding as opposed to just text book definitions and arguments. Personal judgment weighed 2 points as the interviewers judgment was important here to add to the components above.

Understanding	Definition of extreme poverty (2)	Micro and macro level issues. Definitions derived/backed up by personal experience rather than development definitions and theory.
	GoB development interventions (2)	Understanding of the history, limitations and potentials of GoB.
	Development Assistance (2)	Understanding of the dynamics, limitations and potential of Development assistance.
	Agents of Change (2)	Understanding of the different agents of change: civil society, NGOs Politicians etc. Also an understanding of support and partnerships between agents.
	Personal judgement (2)	This was derived from personal impressions based on the above and additional aspects that fall outside of the weights mentioned above.
Sensitivity	Ownership (3)	Expressing their understanding and power of their role, scope and means of creating pro-poor change.
	Personal accounts (2)	Expressing opinions backed up by personal accounts of field and first-hand experience.
	Evidence of advocacy (3)	Showing some initiatives taken to remedy extreme poverty rather than just expressing what needs to be done.
	Personal judgment (2)	This was based on the above and personal impressions.

Researchers

Their extensive educational understanding of extreme poverty was complimented with a personal understanding. Perception of the GoB was cynical, often prescribing to blaming all the ills and failures in policy and implementation on the GoB, without taking into account their good work, limitations or potentials. Development assistance was seen to have good intent; however the failure of successful development again was placed on the GoB due to its weak state mechanisms.

The researchers felt that this bleak picture could not be improved by themselves. Half of interviewees felt their position was purely dictated and controlled by the politics of the country. The groups to better this situation were identified to be civil society and the media, again to monitor the GoB, and not to create new space and means of change. Researchers scored 6 out of 10 on their understanding of issues of extreme poverty. Half the group interviewed expressed a lack of effective power or helplessness for pro-poor change, due to being controlled and dictated by GoB and politics. The other half had a proven record of trying to bring about pro-poor change through advocacy or using their positions to ensure successful implementation of poverty policies. This half also backed up their arguments with examples from the field.

On average half the interviewees in this group fit into what one academics refer to as 'arm-chair researchers' with little field experience thus little empathy to the extreme poor and their needs, most of the researchers gave a array of statistics and little hard evidence rooted from personal or field experience. Researchers scored 4 out of 10 on their sensitivity level of extreme poverty.

Businesspeople

Their understanding of extreme poverty aligned nearly perfectly with international development standards of poverty levels, including caloric intake and social/human rights. GoB was perceived to be a loud advocate of poverty issues, and lacking in hard evidence of effective implementation, this was seen to be due to the GoB's lack of first-hand experience with extreme poverty.

The group expressed their view in relation to the GoB from a business point of view i.e. attract businesses to rural areas to decrease rural-urban migration by creating jobs. Development assistance was seen in a similar light, as agents to create rural infrastructure. The workings development organisations, its practices were absent in this groups understanding.

State and non-state agents should create partnerships with the private sector to help alleviate issues of extreme poverty was the conclusive recommendation. Therefore this group scored 4.5 out of 10 on their understanding of extreme poverty. Sensitivity levels were seen to reflect the understanding of this group, while most of the issues were explained by giving personal experience in the field, there seemed little this group felt they could do without a partnership with the GoB and NGOs. On a whole, this group took care of its workers, and this it was felt was as much as a private sector could do. This group scored 4.5 out of 10 on its sensitivity level.

Civil Society

Their theoretical understanding of extreme poverty was very much complimented by their field experience. The GoB was seen to be lacking in some crucial areas, but also seen as attempting to implement pro-poor polices. Some saw the GoB as consisting of corrupt individuals who could not be straight-jacketed. Development assistance and practices were seen from a critical point of view, but these were very much grounded in first-hand experience and were justified through examples. Conclusively a need for an emancipated consciousness was recommended, the need for citizens including students, civil society and GoB to become aware of their rights and flaws was highlighted. An educated population was seen as a crucial element in ensuring accountability on a macro-scale, and upward mobility for the extreme poor. Therefore civil society scored 8 out of 10 on their understanding of extreme poverty. Civil society expressed an urgent need for change; most were frustrated with the fact that so much aid and assistance had been pooled into the country without it reaching the right people or address the relevant socio-cultural elements. There was however not one person who felt this was to be remedied by any other group but themselves therefore there was a great sense of ownership. Most arguments, and stories were personalised accounts given with much detail and understanding of the issues, which were than reflected in most of the work these interviewees had/were undertaking. Therefore this group scored 6.5 out of 10 on their sensitivity level.

Political leaders

Understood extreme poverty to be a lack of basic necessities and lack of means of gaining those necessities. The missing link was seen to be the weak coordination between GoB and bureaucrats, and between GoB and development organisations. They were left misinformed, and out of the decision making process, it was felt that they must be consulted before researchers by the International donors as they were the elected representatives. Political leaders scored 5 out of 10 on their understanding of issues of extreme poverty.

Their sensitivity levels were determined by their sense of frustration with not being given the right medium and input in formulation of important document such as the PRSP. There were little personal accounts of their interactions with grass-root level extreme poor, but it was felt they were elected and in some respects they were failing the masses. Therefore this group scored a 4.5 on their sensitivity level.

Academics

GoB was perceived to be lacking affective implementation of poverty policies due to a lack of specialisation. The group had a good concise understanding of the historical and social processes that have created the current poverty trends; including the culture of hand hands leading to unsustainable development programs. Over all, this group had a good grasp of macro and micro characteristics and dynamics of extreme poverty hence they scored 8 out of 10.

Half the group had a strong sense of ownership depending on their field experience and exposure to extreme poverty on the grass roots. The other half expressed views that were limited and were not backed up by their sense of responsibility. This was expressed by advocating for the GoB to be rigorous and researchers to do their field experience. Personal accounts to back up ideas and opinions were also present in half the group. Evidence of initiatives were present in 45% of the interviewees thus the group collectively scored 4.5 out of 10 on their sensitivity levels.

Media

Media perceived issues of extreme poverty from that of the educated elite: with international development definitions of poverty. Half the group felt rural development had been a success and focus should be now shifted to urban poverty, while the other half felt the opposite. These opinions rooted from each interviewee's personal background in the kinds of issues they had advocated in. The GoB was perceived to be a complete failure, with no potential and no scope for change. Half the group also felt the same about development assistance while the second half expressed it had worked to better extreme poverty in Bangladesh. Collectively the group scored 5 out of 10 on their understanding level. There was a strong sense of ownership in half the group interviewed and this was backed up by personal initiatives taken to eradicate extreme poor conditions. While the other half seemed to feel it was the responsibility of the poor themselves. 55% of the group gave personal accounts to explain their points therefore the group scored a 5.5 out of 10 on their sensitivity level.

Bureaucrats

Bureaucrats perceived extreme poverty to be multi-dimensional, taking into account disabilities and environmental risk. Ones closely affiliated with the GoB felt that they were doing everything right, and giving NGOs the space and the scope to function and succeed while others felt it had a good grasp of poverty issues on a macro scale but lacked sensitivity on a micro level. 55% of the group felt there were no flaws in development channels therefore this group rated a 4.5 out of 10 on their understanding. All the bureaucrats interviewed expressed little sense of ownership, advocating other agents such as civil society to be the change makers. The views were also not backed up by any personal accounts of field experience and there was very little evidence of personal initiatives to remedy the situation of the extreme poor mainly due to the fact that the majority of the group felt there was nothing to remedy. The group scored 2.5 out of 10 on their sensitivity level.



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