



Influencing policy in a pro-poor manner: Christian Poffet, Tahsinah Ahmed, Bhuiyan Muhammad Imran, Bangladesh

1. Involvement in promoting a pro-poor agenda in policy dialogue

SDC is presently in the process of developing a new cooperation strategy for our programme in Bangladesh. SDC's Country Programme in Bangladesh is pro-poor oriented and emphasises especially the **extreme poor** and gender. Generally, a pro-poor agenda is for us cross-cutting throughout our work and pro-poorness is a fundamental question in all our activities.

The **micro-finance** sector is well developed in Bangladesh and pro-poorness is built in the national policy. However, SDC thinks that there is always scope to be more pro-poor focused. A group of donors launched a programme called Prosper, which has a pro-poor or even an extreme poor focus. Even though SDC is not part of this programme, it was active during the design stage. In this stage SDC was able to bring in a pro-poor focus in the form of our experiences with micro-finance products such as loans and savings for the extreme poor.

In education, SDC is focusing on **non-formal education**. Non-formal education implies an approach, which reaches out to disadvantaged groups. SDC supports the government, non-governmental organizations, apex organizations and academic institutions working in the area of education under a number of projects.

SDC provides support to the government at national level for two projects under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. The project, Post Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development (PLCE HD), focuses on national institution and policy development. During the first phase of this World Bank funded project, the Bureau of Non Formal Education was established and a non-formal education policy was developed. The Bureau supports NGOs to implement non-formal education and train young adults and adults in the area of literacy and skills development. During the first phase of PLCE HD, SDC assisted the Ministry with the development of the non-formal education policy in the form of special backstopping by consultants. The implementation of the policy is the focus of the present second phase of this project, which is co-financed by the Asian Development Bank and DFID.

The second national project under the Ministry is Reaching Out of School Children, which SDC supports together with the World Bank. The project specifically targets 60 of the most poverty stricken areas in the country and provides education to children who are still out of school, mainly due to poverty. Presently, under this project a sub sector analysis for basic education is being prepared. This study is expected to explore the modalities of linking non-formal education with the formal education system and as such, provide the background for developing a sub sector approach to basic education.

SDC also supports civil society active in education. CAMPE is a national coalition of more than 700 NGOs working in the field of education in Bangladesh. CAMPE represents the voice of civil society in their experiences on policy issues in education and plays an important role in policy advocacy and lobbying for quality education. Since 1999, SDC is working with CAMPE in the "Quality Education for All" project, to assist relevant actors in the education sector with the promotion and delivery of effective services to ensure that access to quality education for all is ensured in Bangladesh.

SDC supports a **national NGO**, the Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP), which targets urban working children and provides education and skills development support and job placements. UCEP also works closely with the government and other stakeholders for policy advocacy to promote inclusiveness and child rights. We also work with the **BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) University** Institute of Educational Development, which provides technical support to the government in policy and capacity development. The BRAC University has prepared the thematic paper on education for the Poverty Reduction Strategy and has contributed in the development of the non-formal education policy as well as the National Plan of Action for Education for All. It is now drafting an early childhood education policy for the government. BRAC University advocates for pro-poor policies and the integration of issues such as gender rights and inclusiveness.

Besides all these activities, SDC is supporting the Centre for Mass Education in Sciences (CMES), which targets drop out adolescents in remote rural areas and ASHRAI, which works to provide support to ethnic

minorities. Both these projects target disadvantaged groups and provide support for education and skills development training. They advocate for the rights of minorities and disadvantaged groups, specially girls and women.

2. Whose policy we seek to influence

Bangladesh is a heavily populated country, with all the dynamics that are linked to this. With the social structure being less tight than e.g. in Africa, people have much more a spirit of paying for services and to make business. And even with the **extreme poor** and poor, business development, even at micro-micro scale works. Still, also the political frame needs attention, to support development and create a climate in which also the poor can develop. The Government plays a lead role in policy development and this is being reinforced thanks to the Paris Declaration. However, in many cases, the government capacity is weak, though the interest is strong. Development partners play a strong role here, especially the large ones. There is however scope for smaller donors and civil society actors to contribute as well. The voices of the poor are brought in **through NGOs**.

To broaden the base for pro-poor policy advocacy, we work with a mix of different partners such as central and local government, NGOs, civil society including private enterprises, other bilateral donors and international organisations at the micro, meso and macro levels. With the changes in the political scene of the last 4 months, there has been a frequent change in the ministries. Despite the crisis situation our regular activities and contacts with the government go on. Decisions are taken but sometimes delayed. This interim government has taken a number of pro-poor initiatives. A good example is the annual development funds. The past years these funds were more and more used to serve a political agenda. This present government decided that they could be used for pro-poor issues only.

3. Choice of policy or policy issues

The Poverty Reduction Strategy provides a frame of reference for SDC and other donors. The PRS was developed during the previous elected government and the caretaker government may extend it till the takeover of a new elected government. The question remains, if this document will also be owned by the new government and as such continue to be a reference policy for the country.

4. Knowing that an approach will be pro-poor

SDC introduced a **poverty monitoring system**, which is used on an annual basis in discussions with all our partners. It is mainly a working tool consisting of a set of key questions about inclusion and targeting of the extreme poor and gender. In the process of developing the new country strategy, a workshop with all partners was organised last year. During this workshop we tried to analyse each sector and its programmes in terms of targeting the extreme poor, specifically ethnic minorities

and other disadvantaged groups with **non-formal education and micro-finance activities**, and the poor and communities. In programmes that target communities we emphasise building responsibility of the community for the poor.

In the private sector, we support the promotion of small and micro enterprise development through 'Katalyst', a project funded by DFID, SIDA and SDC. SDC tries to focus on working more pro-poor by linking the project with the more livelihood and pro-poor focused Sustainable Land Use (SLU) programme implemented by Intercooperation.

At the end, we would like to see both quantitative and qualitative results with regard to poverty reduction in return for our investments.

5. The approach in bringing in a pro-poor agenda

Our main approach to being pro-poor is to put local level experiences on the table, when and where issues need to be addressed to fit the needs of the system. For that, SDC engages in the sub-groups of the Local Consultative Group (see also point 6) or provides consultants to assist the government when and where necessary. A good example is the participation in different sub-groups for the development of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

In 1999, SDC decided to work in Sunamganj district. Sunamganj is one of the poorest districts in Bangladesh. The percentage of **extreme poor** and poor is generally higher than in other regions. In 2002, SDC used its Systemic Approach for Rural Development (SARD) to develop ideas for possible synergies between different programme areas in order to improve the outcomes and benefits reaching the poor. After this process of action research, a pilot project was initiated which led to the present concentration of work in Sunamganj.

In 2006 SDC initiated Poverty Monitoring in Sunamganj. Under the lead of the District Administration, SDC initiated the establishment of a concerted system of poverty monitoring for the district between development organisations, including local elected bodies, line agencies, NGOs and projects. This system is expected to be linked to the national poverty reduction strategy indicators and would provide relevant information for developing strategies in favour of poverty reduction in Sunamganj. Ultimately SDC hopes that this will result at a later stage in local level PRS monitoring.

6. Collaboration with other donors on policy issues

We are part of the Local Consultative Group or LCG in Bangladesh. The LCG is composed of 32 Bangladesh-based representatives of bilateral and multilateral donors of the Bangladesh Development Fund and the Secretary of Economic Relations Division, representing the Government. The LCG consists of 21 sub-groups with each their own thematic focus. SDC is a member of the sub groups on education, private sector development,

finance, local governance, gender, poverty, **non-formal education (NFE)** and skills development. SDC was chairing (until May 2007) the sub group on education, which concentrates on policy dialogue and programme development at national level. Presently, the sub-group is involved in finalising the national education policy. The PRS and the 'Quality Education for All' project serve as a framework for policy development.

The NFE working group was instrumental in developing the NFE Policy and has now initiated a study on NFE Mapping in Bangladesh. The Skills Development working group has also initiated a Mapping of Skills Development in Bangladesh. It is expected that these two studies will provide the grounds for exploring a sub sector approach in NFE and Skills Development in the future.

Donors with experiences in NFE like SDC receive considerable goodwill from the government and access to international level. We always stress, and try to bring in, quality aspects. In **Micro-finance** SDC is recognised as a promoter of innovation by both donors and NGOs, also because SDC is willing to share its experiences with others.

In general all donor agencies in Bangladesh include a pro-poor focus in their agenda even though not all in the same way. SDC has the image of being **extreme poor oriented**. SDC does not work with specific other donors but is in general the most comfortable with the smaller ones. We work with the bigger ones in order to focus on national level policies and programmes. Even though harmonisation is the trend, we believe that there is the serious risk of losing track of the extreme poor when working only with the bigger donors.

7. Tangible outcomes in promoting a pro-poor approach

Besides the examples already given, PKSF, one of the largest **micro-finance** apex bodies of the government studied the experiences of our pilot project with Plan Bangladesh along with the Grameen Bank and BRAC. The micro-finance sector in Bangladesh is well developed and organisations like PKSF, Grameen Bank and BRAC are well known for their contribution in sector development. In this environment the role of influencing the government is taken over by these large institutions. These institutions helped the government in preparing micro-credit regulations, influenced the government to make more funds available for increasing outreach and addressing the **extreme poor**.

8. Main challenges and main lessons

SDC always tries to identify strategic persons to influence. A difficulty is that these higher officials can suddenly be transferred and one has then to start again from scratch in building rapport.

Another challenge is to work with a large group of donors as in the LCG, who all have their priorities. It is difficult to have one voice. It is also not always easy to find a balance at a national policy level where correctly

the government has to take the lead and be in the driver's seat. It sometimes happens that a bigger donor takes a lead, in for example a national level debate. In the past we managed to ring the bell during such a process and after discussing the issue a better balance in roles of donors and government was reached.

The capacity of the government and lead donors in the management of projects or programmes with a pro-poor focus is sometimes questionable and raises governance issues. It is challenging to resolve such situations. Experience learns that sometimes certain compromises have to be made in order to continue activities and achieve set objectives.

Working with multilaterals partners is not always that easy as they are often under pressure to disburse funds. We tend to focus more on quality issues and first have certain things in place.

One of the biggest general challenges is that once a policy is in place, it also has to be put into practice. How to create a common understanding at different platforms from national government down to the ground realities? After the **NFE Policy** was approved, SDC's partner CAMPE supported the government to disseminate the policy nationally and regionally (at district level) to develop a common understanding of the policy and to initiate dialogue about its implementation and the role of different stakeholders.

The Harmonisation Action Plan (HAP) in Bangladesh is at the moment being discussed at national level, but at sub-sector level there is a lack of discussion between the different actors involved. This is another challenge yet to be addressed.

Last, it is important to mention that we still feel that we as SDC know what is happening in the field and are staying in touch. This is different for many other actors at national level, who are hardly aware of micro-level realities.

Interview with: Annet Witteveen
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Christian Poffet is an agronomist and worked on a farm in Switzerland for several years before joining SDC. With SDC he has worked in a rural programme in Mozambique, in an agro-forestry technical school in Rwanda, and in the SDC Office in Burkina Faso. He later moved to SDC Head Office, where he was responsible for programmes in Peru and in Haiti. Most recently, Christian Poffet worked at the SDC Office in Bangladesh from 2004 until earlier this year.

Tahsinah Ahmed is a social scientist with over 10 years of professional experience in the field of education, including work with SDC, UNESCO and international NGOs, such as Action Aid, and Save the Children USA. She has worked in a wide range of areas in the education sector, has extensive field experience, and

has developed numerous education materials for national organisations and the UN that are now being used nationally and internationally. Currently, Tahsinah is Senior Programme Officer for Education at the Swiss Cooperation Office in Dhaka.

Bhuiyan Muhammad Imran has an MBA and has been working in the field of livelihoods and private sector development as well as other related areas, with both national and international organisations, for 16 years. He has extensive experience and has contributed to sector development in various areas of enterprise development, microfinance, market linkage, service market promotion, private sector development, local enabling environment development, etc. Currently, he is Senior Programme Officer at the Swiss Cooperation Office in Dhaka.