

Bring Bangladesh together – achieve the final Eradication of Extreme Poverty by 2021

The purpose of this note is to update you on the Manifesto for the Extreme Poor. At shiree we are committed to continuing to build the momentum of this initiative through 2013 and beyond.

The main purpose is **not** the production of a document but is gaining acceptance of a core **idea** or **objective** amongst the widest possible group of stakeholders.

So what is this idea?

Bangladesh really can achieve the final and absolute eradication of extreme poverty by 2021.

- This idea describes an objective that should gain the support of all political, religious or social groupings – it could bring Bangladesh *together*.
- It can be done but only if all people and institutions with power and resources, at both national and local levels and across sectors, act decisively. It has to be taken up as a national cause.
- It would confirm Bangladesh as the world leader in poverty eradication.
- Achieving this objective would be a fitting celebration of 50 years of Bangladesh.

How big is the challenge?

There are many possible definitions of extreme poverty. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2010 identified 17.6% of the population (about 28 million people) as falling below a lower poverty line defined by reference to the expenditure required to meet basic consumption needs. The proportion of the population falling below this lower (and the upper) poverty lines has been steadily declining over at least the last 20 years. However as total population continues to expand a falling percentage does not always translate into reduced numbers of people in absolute poverty. Furthermore, while consistently high economic growth is good for reducing poverty, local and national events including natural disasters have the potential to push large numbers back below the line.

To eradicate extreme poverty by 2021 constitutes a huge national challenge that many will say is impossible. The challenge is to take about 4 million people, or 1 million families, out of extreme poverty **every year** from 2015 to 2021 - and to keep them out!

Is this the same objective as making Bangladesh a middle income country by 2021?

For Bangladesh to become a middle income country is already a stated national objective.¹ To achieve this objective, an annual GDP growth rate of 8% by 2013, rising to 10% by 2017, has been

¹ See for example the Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021: “Making Vision 2021 a Reality. General Economics Division of the Planning Commission”.

established as a target. However achieving middle income status is not a sufficient (perhaps not even a necessary) condition for the eradication of extreme poverty. India is the most obvious regional example of a country that **has** achieved middle income status while many millions remain in dire poverty. To eradicate extreme poverty requires measures that recognise the special challenges faced by the poorest of the poor (see below). Extreme poverty will not be eradicated as a spin-off from rapid economic growth alone.

Restating the Challenges

The shiree programme has been working with about 100,000 extreme poor households since 2009. We have listened to these people as well as to experts in poverty research and to practitioners from other programmes such those from BRAC who have been “Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction” for many years. From the beneficiary perspective we have identified **6 key challenges** that push people into extreme poverty and prevent them from rising from this state.

1. Insufficient Economic Opportunities

Either for employment or self employment, considering where the extreme poor live, considering seasonal factors, considering their levels of education and physical capacity, considering their limited access to land or other productive assets, considering how much is needed for their families to do better than just to survive.

2. Access to Public Services and Transfers

Considering the need for basic quality services and the right of all citizens to access these, considering the inability of the poorest to procure alternatives, considering the uneven geographical distribution of service provision, including health and education but also support to economic activities (e.g. agriculture related) and public goods such as justice or law and order, including social safety nets that should be targeted first and foremost towards the extreme poor.

3. Vulnerability to External Shocks

The extreme poor suffer most and are least able to recover from major natural disasters. Community level shocks such as the repeated impact of river erosion push thousands into extreme poverty. In urban areas the impact of “man-made disasters” such as slum evictions and fires is no less devastating than natural catastrophes.

4. Health and Nutrition Vulnerability

Poor nutrition is a key mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Untreated or inadequately treated chronic health problems are prevalent amongst the poorest and, together with the impact of illness and accidents, are probably the most common single cause pushing families into extreme poverty and keeping them there.

5. Gender Inequity

Issues of gender inequity cut across and enhance the negative impact of the other challenges that cause and sustain extreme poverty. Hence women and girls will find it more difficult to earn a living wage or to access vital services. Female headed households are more

likely to be suppressed in an extreme poor state while gender based violence and gender specific issues such as early marriage and dowry have a strong negative impact on women and their families.

6. Marginalised Group specific risks and Vulnerabilities

This is a broad category that includes the special challenges faced by a diverse range of marginalised and socially excluded groups. Some groups, such as horijans, dalits or adivasis, are historically disadvantaged facing the impact of discrimination in education, service access and employment opportunities. Other groups like street children or street dwellers are more recent but are no less excluded in their ability to access the benefits of national economic development. Old age and disability are two causes of marginalisation commonly associated with extreme poverty.

Can anything be done?

Extreme poor households do not face only one of the above challenges but multiple combinations of varying severity, impact and duration. It may seem that the issue of extreme poverty is so intractable, dynamic, widespread and severe that it will be impossible to solve. **But this is not the case**, there are many practical things that can be done under each of the above headings – from economic empowerment through asset and cash transfer to more effective targeting of services and measures to address social exclusion or gender based discrimination. Most of all the experience of programmes like shiree is that when the extreme poor are recognised, brought into the mainstream and given a chance, they will grab this opportunity and work incredibly hard to transform their own lives and those of their families.

The ambition of eradicating the extreme forms of poverty by 2021, working from the poorest of the poor upwards, fulfils the conditions of a SMART objective. That is the objective is:

- *Specific*
- *Measurable*
- *Achievable*
- *Very challenging but Realistic*
- *Timebound*

What can be done?

Since mid 2012, shiree has been gathering recommendations via the website and through public consultation. Over 200 specific recommendations have been received so far and over 2,000 people have been engaged in some way in the process. We will continue to support this dialogue and will produce a Manifesto for the Extreme Poor including a synthesis of these recommendations in mid 2013.

Shiree is a single donor funded programme. If the Manifesto is going to be effective, the core idea and objective must be taken up as a national cause and inspire actions that extend well beyond any specific programme. The eradication of extreme poverty needs to be part of the national vision, led by government but enrolling the active support of all sectors of society. Development partners could play a specific role but the achievement of the objective would depend crucially on the effective targeting of national, GoB funded, social protection and economic support activities. Other key implementers would be local actors such as businesses providing employment opportunities and officials and politicians working to improve the targeting of services and transfers. NGOs would continue to play a major role, especially building on their experience in accessing the most difficult to reach and difficult to help groups. Regular and transparent reporting of progress that actively engages the media and the broadest possible spectrum of civil society would be a key criteria for success.

What next?

- Continue to raise awareness of the issue of extreme poverty and of the potential to address this issue – it may seem surprising but many people in positions of power and influence still fail to recognise the existence of extreme poverty, or assume that it will be solved as a result of economic growth alone.
- Continue to gather ideas and recommendations for the Manifesto via the shiree website and through other forums.
- Aim to have the core objective: **the final eradication of extreme poverty from Bangladesh by 2021** accepted by the widest possible set of stakeholders.
- Work with sectoral experts and others to synthesize recommendations, producing a summary Manifesto document by mid 2013.
- Use the Manifesto document and sub reports relating to the 6 challenge areas for continued national and local advocacy.
- Monitor success as acceptance of the idea moves people from commitment into action - recognise this success and encourage others to follow.

A question for you

Do you agree that the success of a country should be, not exclusively, but first and foremost judged by how well it treats its poorest citizens?

If you agree then you accept the need to focus attention, talent and resources on getting rid of extreme poverty from Bangladesh.