

Human Rights Human Dignity and Sustainable Development

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Thank you very much, Professor Bholanath Dutta. I am here, because of Professor Dutta. I was not ready to travel. I don't travel these days very much. And I am due to travel again on the next 13th September, a rather long journey to the USA. But Bholanath persuaded me to be here today. He is very persuasive. I say this, because noting his persuasive power, I can state with confidence that, with him at the helm, the MTC Global will go very far. I thank him and congratulate him and his associates.

I heard the comments of Professor R S S Mani with interest and he made some very pertinent points. Professor Golam Samdani Fakir, from Bangladesh, has talked about sustainable development. In fact, this is the in-thing now, but it is not going to be easy to translate all the talks and proposals into action. And Professor Ratnalekar has given a list of don'ts: don't do this, don't do that; yes, he has also provided a list of do's. This reminds me that we all are equal human beings, with the same set of universal human rights. Everybody, all of us here and everywhere, including those who are not fortunate enough to even come near this community, i.e. those who work physically in fields, factories, and streets. Everybody is entitled to pursuing their rights as vigorously as possible. But, nobody must do one thing and that is to encroach upon the rights of others. And this is something I try to put across in Bangladesh. I travel to rural areas all over Bangladesh as much as I can; and one key message that I try to give is: we're all equal as humans; we have the right to expand our horizons, but nobody has the right to undermine anybody else's rights. This is something that if we, all of us take unto ourselves and follow through, we can surely contribute to the evolving of a fair society. One can try to be whatever they want—rich, highly educated, highly placed in society, economy or any other sphere of life—but they must do it in a manner that does not encroach upon anybody else's right. In my judgement, this is one of the most basic things that the educationists should put across to their students. I try to do it.

I have been introduced as Chairman of Dhaka School of Economics which is a higher educational institution and also as Chairman of Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) which works with the downtrodden, the poor and the extreme poor, for their socio-economic progress. I think we have so far talked about higher education a lot in this session, and also about sophisticated skill training and entrepreneurship development, geared to making large profits. Sustainable development has also been mentioned. But we have not talked about the downtrodden at all. In the context of sustainable development, one key element is: nobody is to be left out, everybody has

to be included. Indeed, the society cannot go forward sustainably, leaving any segment of population, even an individual, behind. And my understanding is that in India, depending on the poverty lines used, 25-30 percent of the total population is still poor. In Bangladesh, the proportion is about the same. But in terms of numbers, the poor account for 40-45 million in Bangladesh and here, in India, it may be 250 million plus, perhaps 300 million or more people who are poor. So we have to think about poverty eradication if we are talking about sustainable development or just sustainable education. And we've heard Professor Samdani say that basic education is included in SDG4 which is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals; and basic education is surely for everybody. However, we don't have to talk about the basic education of our children, i.e. children of those of us who are here in this room and others like us or more accomplished than us, because we are very aware of that and we make sure that our children get the best possible education. But it is the children of the poor, who do not have the resources and do not have access to good, even any educational institutions, should be a critical focus. They are an integral part of sustainable development paradigm. We do a little bit of that at Dhaka School of Economics. It is a post-graduate institute mostly, although we have also recently started an undergraduate programme. We facilitate economically less fortunate students to study at the School. One of the major programmes we teach is environmental and resource economics, and environment is one of the pillars of sustainable development.

Sustainable development, all of you may be aware, is socially acceptable, environmentally sound economic growth. In other words, it has three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. If you look at the definition given in the Agenda 21 adopted in 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, Brazil, sustainable development has been defined with reference to economic development, social development, and environmental protection with the human being placed at the centre of the process. And that has been repeated in the outcome document, *The Future We Want*, of the 2012 Rio+20 conference. This time, the definition starts with the human being. In Rio 1992, it was economic, social, and environmental concerns and then the human being; and, in 2012 Rio+20, it is said that all development is for the human beings, which consists of an integrated economic, social, and environmental progress.

We are now aware of the mind-boggling inequalities in the world a lot more than before. There is a study (2016) by Oxfam that has found that the richest 1% of the world population owns half the world's wealth, and the other 99% owns the other half. This is not a sustainable world. I think it is the inequality that is at the heart of unsustainability. From education to economic to social development to political participation, everywhere there is inequality. And that's social exclusion. In fact, inequality in education sustains the other inequalities. I think it's time we focus on inclusiveness. When we consider skill training, employment generation, enterprise and entrepreneurship development, we should include all segments of society having regard to their differential circumstances and views. I do.

I know that economic growth is essential, but it is not enough for sustainable development. And we have to get out of the fold of neo-classical economics which is

focused on profit for the producers and satisfaction for the consumers, with everybody making decisions rationally. That's the essence of neo-classical economics. Rationality can be taken to any extent in relation to self interest. But such thoughts as *I don't recognize anybody else's interests and rights, I only want MY rights and progress* can't be humanly rational. If we pursue such thoughts and actions, we are acting against social cohesion and peaceful social progress; and that is what is happening around the world. We now have the neo-classical economic paradigm ruling around the world, where everybody pursues their own purposes regardless of what happens to anybody else. And that's why the world is now what it is—sharply divided in terms of social, economic, and political participation across and within countries. This is basically true in India and in Bangladesh and all over the world.

We talk a lot about poverty reduction; and there are many programmes in Bangladesh, in India, and in other countries focused on the poor. But, these programmes don't go far in terms of sustainable removal of poverty. These anti-poverty efforts are often undermined by the powerful and selfish interests.

That is basically the framework that prevails. The social formation or the class formation remains highly stratified.

The prevailing sharp contradiction between the rich and the downtrodden (the under-classes) is, to me, the crux of the matter from the point of view of sustainable development. Neo-classicism has led to neo-liberalism in terms of attitude, prescriptions, and actions. That's the perspective that rules today. And it causes and enhances disparity and perpetuates and sharpens socio-economic and power distinctions.

In this context, please recall something I have said earlier that as human beings we are all equal and nobody has any right to undermine anybody else's rights and interests. But, what is going on is contrary to this inherent demand of humanity. Also, Professor Ratnalekar has said in so many words that we're not supposed to do certain things, which harms and hurts others.

Let me now come back to the issue of sustainable development: Here, two of the slogans, shown in the documents you have distributed, I like very much. One is '*Educate, Empower, Elevate*'. The other is '*Educate, Empower and Employ*'. Thus, you educate and train people to empower them. Very good first step. But empowerment is not only education and training, it also depends on health services. We, who are present here in this room and people like us and those who are in stronger socio-economic or political positions, can access health services as required, but there are people, particularly the downtrodden, who cannot; and therefore facilitation of health services for them is important, along with education and skill training. Education, skill training, and health services including access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation lead to genuine empowerment of the people concerned. Empowered, they are ready to achieve and move forward. Now, when they are empowered, they may be expected to find jobs, but in many cases they can't. And many may not wish to work for others. These people have to be assisted to set up enterprises to create their own jobs. The PKSF now assists people of little means, by

providing credit, supporting access to technology and market information and marketing assistance, to set up enterprises at scales that they can manage properly.

While introducing me, Professor Bholanath Dutta mentioned micro-credit. It is now known, through authentic research activities, that microcredit is of little avail in the context of poverty removal. Indeed, PKSf was a microcredit organization when (November 2009) I took over as its Chairman. It provided money to the partner organizations (POs)—carefully selected well-run NGOs; and they extended microcredit to poor and even non-poor people on an annual basis, and collected it in weekly installments with interest during the relevant year. It was not much of a consideration as to what was happening to the people who took microcredit. The main consideration was whether the money could be collected back. But, in the Memorandum of Association (MoA) of the PKSf, which is a Government established Foundation, microcredit is not even mentioned. The purposes of PKSf as mentioned in its MoA are education, health services, skill training, employment creation, livelihood improvement, and credit—not microcredit. Credit does not mean microcredit, it can mean any amount of credit. Now, we call it appropriate credit and it goes up to Taka 10 lakh, the equivalent of about US\$12,800. The amount given to a household depends on what it wants and can do. The credit is now given for up to two years or even longer periods. The repayment is monthly, three monthly, or, in the case of agriculture, after the harvest. In fact, the repayment schedule is determined in consultation with the particular borrowers. We have also changed the approach from project approach or credit approach to human being-centered development. So all our programmes are developed taking into account the circumstances of the people, their interests and expectations, their understanding of how they want to go forward, and so on.

Also, credit is now given as one service in a package of services which also include skill training, assistance in accessing necessary technology and market information, and marketing assistance. This package, it has been seen, tremendously improves the ability of the people to succeed and our experience is that they usually move forward and soon get out of poverty and move on to beyond poverty sustainable socio-economic progress.

The PKSf is, thus, solidly contributing to poverty eradication and sustainable development. One of the key elements in the changed PKSf approach is to help empower the downtrodden to enable them to take control of their own destiny. The basic idea is to focus on the human being and empower them through education, skill training, and health services along with assurance of clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. And I have mentioned before that when somebody is empowered, they may find wage or salaried employment or establish their own businesses.

In the second case, they need a few other things, which should be provided. Some of those (training, technology, market information and marketing assistance, and finance) I have already mentioned. But, for a solid base for them to build their forward movement on, there are some other things they are best helped to gain access to. One such factor is social capital. Going alone is very difficult. Hence, we first try to ensure

social capital formation within the family. In the existing practice, there is usually a lack of coordination of family efforts. 'The head of the family knows best' is the guiding principle. Others, particularly women, have little or no say. So, we try to make sure that all members of the family come together. Within the framework of the multidimensional, integrated, human-centred approach, the ENRICH (Enhancing resources and capacities of households for the eradication of their poverty), the PKSf and PO officials sit down with all the members of each downtrodden family in ENRICH areas to prepare a family development plan for the family. The family is then assisted on that basis towards eradication of their poverty and beyond poverty sustainable progress. All members of the family contribute to the process in an integrated fashion. The PKSf stands beside them and help them move forward on the basis of that plan, which is adjustable on the basis of experiences gathered along the way. So, social capital formation in this approach starts with the family or household. At the community level, we focus on each ward of an ENRICH union—usually there are 8 wards in a union. In a ward, there are about 30,000 people. An ENRICH Centre is established in each ward, where people of the particular ward come to socialize, discuss issues, take decisions regarding community level issues, and take possible actions to address them.

The PKSf also tries to work in close cooperation with other institutions and service providers, both government and non-government, working in the area. Resources are limited and available resources from different sources should go further as a result of working together like this. Indeed, social capital is extremely important. Social capital can be more important under certain circumstances than other forms of capital. In addition, there are few other things that they need to have access to, so that they can go forward solidly. Finance through appropriate credit arrangement, I have mentioned earlier, but the financial service of insurance, which ensures that they have something to fall back on if a disaster (e.g. flood, cyclone) strikes, is another service they need.

Their socio-economic situation plunges when such an event strikes and without insurance they find themselves in economic quagmire. Recovery and rehabilitation become a nightmare. But, on grassroots level insurance, not much progress has been achieved yet in Bangladesh. There are administrative and legal issues. But, there are efforts to resolve them so that insurance (livestock, crop, health, etc.) can be provided at the grassroots level. Our pilot activities show strong prospects.

At the same time, it is necessary to arrange for the people concerned necessary skill training, which MTC Global is doing for higher levels of skills. Skill training can be at various levels, from rudimentary to a very high level, involving modern technology, depending on who the trainees are. Training on ICT, for example, can be from low to mid or high level. The PKSf starts with the lower level skill training for the downtrodden, often with little or no basic education; and as they go on, their skills are upgraded, as appropriate. Then their access to technology needs to be ensured and the PKSf facilitates their access to appropriate technologies. They are also supported, as I have indicated before, to gain access to market information and assisted in the marketing of their outputs. Armed with this support package, they turn around quickly. As they go forward, they can borrow up to Taka 10 lakh from the PKSf

sources if they have an appropriate project, along with other services as appropriate. But, our experience is that people usually borrow Taka 3 to 5 lakh at a time. With such an amount, they can set up their own businesses and, in 3 to 4 years, by using the borrowed money and some of the profits generated and other services received, they can and usually do achieve a level of living which is humanly dignified.

Our long term goal is for everybody to enjoy universal human rights and live with human dignity. So, we are trying to stand by the downtrodden and help them to move towards that goal. There is much more, in this context, in the approach followed by the PKSf that I can talk about. But, given time constraint, let me finish as quickly as I can; Let me just say that it is a multidimensional, multidisciplinary approach. Human living is multidimensional. It's not only economic. So we bring in all the dimensions into the programme, which include various social, economic, cultural, and political aspects as well as climate change issues. To address all these aspects, a multidisciplinary approach is followed. People from various disciplines are needed. So we bring them all together. Our focus is on the individual, on the household, and then on the neighbouring areas. The area we now focus on is the union—the lowest administrative unit in Bangladesh, where, on average, about 3 lakh people live. Once the union is selected, all the households therein are surveyed and then, using a set criteria, the downtrodden are identified, who have turned out to make up 50-60% of the total households of an average union, considering the 153 unions in which the ENRICH is currently being implemented. But health and education are provided to all the households in a union, while economic and financial and other services are provided to the downtrodden in addition to education and health services. The total population is 4.5 million in the 153 unions. Internal and external evaluations show that the approach and action programmes work effectively and the people are moving forward satisfactorily. We are under tremendous pressure for extending the ENRICH programme to other areas of the country, but the resources at hand, as of now, do not permit large-scale expansion. However, we have initiated the process of expanding the ENRICH programme to cover other areas to a limited extent.

The ENRICH in fact addresses all important aspects of people's living. It's not a project for a few years. We have replaced the project approach by human-being centered approach. A project is for 3 or 5 years. A project is implemented as designed to generate a certain internal rate of return. If that is achieved, it's fine. Money has been well spent. Usually, it is not investigated as to what happens on the ground, i.e. how have the targeted people fared. If the allocated money has been spent and the target rate of return has been achieved, the project is successful, highly successful. But, the missing link, not usually evaluated is whether or not the targeted people have overcome poverty sustainably and moved on to a sustainable pathway of progress. A project finishes after 3/4/5 years and the project implementers go away. Unsupported, the people go back again. They relapse. That's the usual picture. We have changed it. Not only that we focus on the human being but also we stay by the side of the people for as long as necessary for them to be on a sustainable development pathway. It's a programme approach, not a project approach. When, as is the PKSf's, the purpose is to work with the downtrodden to help them get out of poverty and, then, improve their

living conditions on a sustainable basis, we believe the just outlined approach is the right way to go.

We do not need to be concerned about those young people who are fortunate in having parents, who are rich or highly educated or high government officials or high private sector functionaries. They can take care of themselves. What is necessary is that there must be high quality institutions for education, health, and other services and they will usually take advantage of those. However, in their case, there is a possibility that some of the young people may degenerate into drug addiction and may take up anti-social activities. I know one young man, who argued: *“My father is rich so I don’t have to work. I shall own all the money when my father will die and I can then spend it anyway I like. It’s mine! And therefore I start spending it now. I don’t have to study, I don’t have to work hard the way my father did. Everything is fine for me.”* He, in fact, degenerated into a chaotic life. Also, these days, we see young people getting into such social evils as drug addiction, tobacco addiction and teasing of girls. They so degenerate regardless of their educational backgrounds—general, technical, and highly respectable educational institutions. As parents are too busy making more and more money for themselves or for their children or in climbing more and more social or power related ladders. They have no time for their children. Their children, therefore, are neglected. While these children are provided with all amenities and facilities and private tuition arrangements, they receive little or no parental care and supervision. Social cohesion formation within the family is not given necessary importance. The children, therefore, do whatever they think best. Through Facebook, they make friends; and all these facebook friends are not good or of noble pursuits. There are those who are ill-motivated and of evil pursuits, who may seek to influence them to follow what they are doing. Frustrated some of these young people become easy prey to persuasion by those evil friends and recruitment by terrorist godfathers for terrorist activities. This is happening in Bangladesh, we have seen, regardless of the educational background of the young people. In Bangladesh, it was generally believed earlier, and I also believed, that terrorists usually come from among the students of Madrassas. Now, we find it’s not true.

This process has to be stopped and the young people likely to degenerate should be rescued and those who have already degenerated should be found and rehabilitated. The parents, teachers, the government, and civil society, all have roles to play in this context. Efforts are afoot by the Government and other institutions/networks in Bangladesh trying to impress upon the parents that they should take care of their children. It may be mentioned that the policy of the Government of Bangladesh on terrorism is one of zero tolerance and has been very successful containing the menace.

Also, poverty is another reason behind terrorism. The global terrorism has emerged as a major threat because many people in certain parts of the world have been done serious wrong to. Those who have been wronged—economically exploited, politically subjugated, militarily tortured and suppressed—have been devastated. With their back against the wall, they found that they had no future so that they, it appears, decided that they have to do something, however dangerous that may be for themselves. So they are doing, what they can—mounting terrorist attacks on chosen targets. It’s a

response to the injustices done to them. Indeed, injustices cannot be sustained over a long term. Justice must replace injustice while time remains, otherwise there can be much more dangerous reaction (terrorism) than as at present. Indeed, perpetuated injustices will give rise to situations that no one may be able to manage. A huge threat to humanity.

There are at least two other menacing threats to humanity. One is climate change which has been caused by unprecedented destruction of the global natural wealth and emitting huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The other is the nuclear threat. In the case of nuclear threat, these days there are some people in charge of nuclear arsenals, who are unpredictable to say the least. So one doesn't know what might happen to the world.

A nuclear war can destroy the whole world but that will not, I expect, happen. On the other hand, climate change is occurring and worsening fast. On both counts, we, academics, may play a role, particularly in terms of contributing to national and international opinion formation against the former and for individual country and globally collective action to be taken to bring global climate change under control and for international cooperation in minimizing risks of and adaptation to climate change impacts. In relation to combating terrorism also, we can play a useful role in mobilizing public opinion and for the governments and other actors concerned to act decisively and fast, from their own vantage points and collectively by all actors within countries as well as regionally and globally.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that whatever responsibilities we have to carry out, we must concentrate on them, perform honestly and try to achieve the goals set; but we must, at the same time, work towards ensuring equitable and sustainable improvement in the circumstances of those who are now left behind for them to enjoy universal human rights and live in humanly dignified fashion. Sustainable development, I repeat, is not achieved if anybody is left behind. Thank you all very much.