

## Proceedings of the TDP National Dialogue 2006

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### **TRADE LIBERALIZATION AND POVERTY LINKAGE: RMG AND MOBILE PHONE SECTORS IN BANGLADESH Conference Room, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka August 31, 2006**

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Unnayan Shammanay (US) and CUTS-CITEE have jointly undertaken a project titled ‘Linkages between Trade, Development and Poverty Reduction’ in the context of Bangladesh aiming to achieve a number of objectives including (i) facilitation and cross-fertilisation of experiences and lessons learnt on linkages between trade, development and poverty reduction in the developing countries and to develop appropriate policy responses, (ii) facilitation of synergy between governments and civil society organizations to learn from each other and strengthen their collective perspectives and positions in the emerging debate on the linkages between trade, development and poverty reduction, and (iii) development-oriented trade policies, based on learning from research and other activities, by taking into account the interests and priorities of the poor and marginalized sections of the society.

As a partial requirement of the project, result of the perception survey of key stakeholders on two leading sectors: RMG and Cellular Phone in Bangladesh have been presented in a national dialogue held on August 31 in the Conference Room of the Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka. Total 44 participants representing various national and international organizations, key government agencies, national research organizations, business associations and civil society representatives attended the dialogue. Dr. M.A Razzaque, Department Of Economics, University of Dhaka and M. Abu Eusuf, Department of Development Studies of the same university presented two keynote papers on RMG and Cellular Phone sectors respectively. Mr. Feroz Ahmed, Honorable Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. Dr. Selim Raihan, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka and Muhammad Kamaluddin (on behalf of Mr. Fashiur Rahman) of Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers’ Association (BGMEA) were present as designated discussants.

#### **Launching campaign kit “Banijyo Sohoj Path”, Trade Made Easy**

At the very beginning of the dialogue Dr. Atiur Rahman and Mr. Feroz Ahmen jointly unveiled the cover of a booklet titled “Banijyo Sohoj Path”, trade made easy, jointly published by the Unnayan Shamannay and the CUTS International.

#### **Welcome address by Dr. Atiur Rahman**

Professor Atiur Rahman, Chairman, Unnayan Shamannay delivered the welcome speech. In his address of welcome Dr. Rahman introduced the designated discussants and other distinguished guests and welcome them to the event. He explained the TDP project background and objective of the national dialogue at the outset and told that perception of the key stakeholders on various trade related issues and its dissemination are the integral components of the project. He mentioned that while launching the project in 2005 a background paper on ‘Trade, Development and Poverty Reduction’ was prepared by Unnayan Shamannay which shows that Bangladesh has by now implemented many important liberalization measures leading to a significant decline in quantitative restrictions, rationalization and diminution of import tariffs, and liberalization of the foreign exchange regime. To what extent liberalization has contributed to the slowing down of poverty incidence response to

growth and rising inequality is currently not known. Despite the existing inconclusive evidence, the background paper points out that the importance of liberalization should not be downplayed. Rather, the most critical challenge facing Bangladesh is to make trade liberalization effective. This has now become even more challenging given the post-MFA intense competition facing by the country's RMG industry, which has established a direct link between trade and poverty through the creation of employment opportunities.

Dr. Rahman emphasized that one of the objectives of the project is to enable the stakeholders take better-informed decisions, and formulate their strategies with a greater level of understanding of the impact and the opportunities from international trade. For this purpose, two sectors: RMG and Cellular Phone have been identified where case studies were conducted. The dialogue shares the findings of the perception survey on these sectors with the learned audience in a round table manner. He highlighted that brief case study of RMG and Cellular Phone sector in Bangladesh was prepared with a view to highlighting the effective role that international trade can play in poverty alleviation considering the structural and labor issues influencing various dynamics associated with exports, growth and poverty relationships.

He also mentioned that an easily understandable booklet titled '**Banijja Shahaj Path**' (**Trade Made Easy**) was prepared in Bengali and launched for mass distribution so that any one without having prior background on trade could understand various issues related to trade easily.

Finally, he thanked all for their participation to this august gathering and welcome Dr. M.A. Razzaque and M. Abu Eusuf to deliver their presentations.

#### **Case study on RMG by Dr M.A. Razzaque, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka**

While presenting case study on RMG sector Dr. Razzaque put emphasis that international trade helps allocating resources efficiently, increasing efficiency due to competition, enhancing capacity utilization, expanding employment and other natural resources and acquisition of better technology. He mentioned that through these routes trade influences growth which, in turn, influences the poverty situation though empirical evidence concerning the trade and growth relationship is mixed. His presentation highlighted how the role of RMG being single most important driver of export growth can play in poverty alleviation considering structural and labour issues influencing various dynamics associated with exports, growth and poverty relationships. The presentation was based mostly on important stakeholders' perception on how to enhance the trade-growth-poverty relationship for the sector.

He mentioned that RMG sector experienced rapid growth of employment generated 24 percent average growth per annum over the years 1980 to 2004. He highlighted several factors that have affected the sector such as, poor physical infrastructure (ports, inland transportation), electricity (heavily dependent on generators), shortage of skilled workers, weak backward integration, political unrest etc. He also mentioned some apprehensions about prospect in the Post-MFA Regime such as, competitiveness based only on cheap labour, low quota rent in the US market and unable to fulfil EU-ROO.

Dr. Razzaque also emphasized despite all its contributions, RMG industry is known for a wide variety of deprivations of workers such as, lack of proper infrastructural facilities, lack of safety at workplace, non-compliance with the minimum wages, very low wages, gender-insensitive working environment, lack of skill development and training opportunities, gross violation of labour standards etc.

Besides, some observers are of the view that cost of doing business is high in Bangladesh and if the costs of doing businesses are reduced, its effect on competitiveness will be positive, which in turn can promote higher pay and better working environment though this again should not be considered as a necessary association, he added.

Based on the perception of the key stakeholders he also highlighted various issues including

- Government has to play the most critical role.
- Employers will have to realise that in the era of globalisation exporting is considered to be a modern activity.
- labour unionism should not impede the growth of the sector.
- Donors could support for disseminating knowledge about labour standards, campaigning the need for good working environment, facilitating dialogues, exchange of ideas amongst stakeholders and technical assistance.
- Wage adjustment will have to be such that the industry remain competitive.
- If the sector is adversely affected, the positive trade-poverty link could be reversed.
- But, mere expansion of the sector may not promote workers' welfare.
- Obtaining trade preferences and reducing the cost of doing business can help.
- Skill improvement will benefit in the long-run, but in the short-run low labour cost is key to competitiveness.

Finally, Dr. Razzque concluded that RMG industry has established a direct relationship between trade and poverty alleviation, expansion of the sector will enhance the trade-poverty linkage further. The Bangladesh case illustrates that the role of government is very crucial in promoting trade-poverty linkages in the RMG sector.

#### **Case study on Cellular Phone by M. Abu Eusuf, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka**

At the very outset of his presentation Mr. Eusuf explained an overview of Cellular Phone sector in Bangladesh how it grew over time. He mentioned that liberalization in the telecommunication sector has attracted a large amount of foreign investment. Since the government allows 100% foreign equity and the foreign investors can repatriate their share of profit completely, a number of foreign firms have shown their interest to operate in the market. Government issued license to only one operator to provide cellular phone service in 1989. The operator, the Citycell, entered the market in 1993 and enjoyed monopoly power for 4 years The scenario changed gradually due to increased competition since 5 firms are currently providing the service. The three largest operators (Grameen Phone, Aktel and Banglalink) hold 93% of the market share in terms of the number of subscribers, he added.

Mr. Eusuf pointed out various contributions of the Cellular Phone Sector to Poverty Reduction and Economic Progress including

- Each year government earns an increasingly larger amount of revenue from the cell phone sector .
- The consumer surplus has increased since a phone call costs much less than a physical trip or other alternatives of information transference.

- Cellular phone has become the prime way to establish a link between the migrant and his/her relatives residing at some other places.
- Direct employment in the sector is around 8-10 thousand.
- The cell phone has provided a large number of people to be self-employed by starting phone business. And this number is likely to be much higher than the direct employment figure (Probably around 2.5-3 lac).
- Market information is now more readily available resulting in better market access and coverage and it has benefited the rural and small traders most.
- A better flow of market information also raises the efficiency of the market through greater competition and diminishing the levels of uncertainty and transaction costs.
- The increased use of cellular phone has improved the decision making process where previously information gap was playing a role
- The advent of cellular phone has directly/indirectly increased the economic opportunities for women, which in turn imply a higher level of female empowerment.
- With the help of the cellular phone people are now able to communicate with health service providers more easily.

He also highlighted involvement of Cellular phone operators in various community services such as,

- Fund raising program for human welfare.
- Promoting sports and sponsoring various sports tournament.
- Participation in flood relief program.
- Promoting various issues to raise social consciousness.
- Helping the disabled children. Computer donation program etc.

Mr. Eusuf highlighted some stakeholders' views regarding the Cellular Phone sector and the extent of its liberalization as follows:

- Most of the stakeholders were aware of the impact of the liberalization though most of the consumers were not aware of the exact regulatory changes that had taken place.
- The stakeholders were unanimous on the fact that the access to cellular phone services has increased highly in recent years. Almost all of them directly/indirectly pointed to the teledensity of the country that has increased from 1.07 to 9.97 in the last 5 years.
- In 2001, the call charge was Taka 16 per minute. But now it ranges between Taka 1.00 and Taka 4.40. Even then, many of the stakeholders believe that the call charge is still higher and further competition will reduce it leading to greater consumer benefit.
- The stakeholders also mentioned that liberalization has increased the choices of the consumers.
- Many of the stakeholders think that the rapid growth of the cell phone sector has created demand for skilled labors

- Almost 40-50 thousand people have benefited from the direct employment opportunities offered by the cell phone companies. .
- Around 2.5-3 lacs people have been saved from the web of unemployment by the indirect employment generation impact of the cell phone sector.
- Stakeholders think that the degree of competition must be increased by allowing more firms to operate in the market.
- Role of the regulatory body is crucial here since collusive oligopoly may arise in its 'tacit' form.
- The service providers comment that the tax burden on handset and telecom equipment is high in Bangladesh. This tax on handset is also encouraging the smuggling of handset. To reach the poor handset price and call charge should be reduced or special offers for the poor should be introduced.

### **Designated discussants**

#### **Dr. Selim Raihan, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka**

Dr. Selim Raihan thanked Dr. Razzaque and Mr. Eusuf for their well-articulated papers. He mentioned that there is a strong linkage between liberalization and poverty reduction particularly in the Cellular Phone sector. While discussing liberalization we have to consider domestic trade, multilateral trade and regional trade. There would be trade diversification effect for SAFTA. It seems that trade liberalization and RMG growth goes hand in hand even after MFA phase out in 2005. The real MFA will be phased out after 2008 (China factor). Bangladesh RMG will face fierce price competition then.

He mentioned that one of the principal mechanisms through which trade liberalization operates is the price mechanism. The consumers and producers are affected by the changes in the prices of the commodities they buy from and sell in the market. It needs to be examined whether trade liberalization has any effect on the changes in these prices.

Dr. Raihan emphasized that what is happening to the bottom 10 percent of the households (very poor) and the basket of commodities they consume and sell need to be identified.

Focusing on the labor market Dr. Raihan pointed out that it is true that most of the poor rely on labor markets for the bulk of their income in Bangladesh. Hence, the effects of trade liberalization on wages and employment are important, especially those of unskilled workers. Mentioning recent RMG labor unrest in determining minimum wage he pointed out that if wage increases, what will happen in competitiveness of export prospect we have to think of it. He also highlighted that there is no theory in New Classical Economics on minimum wage. Wage is determined through the interaction of demand for and supply of labor.

#### **Muhammad Kamaluddin, BGMEA Dhaka**

Thanking the presenters for their well-focused paper Mr. Kamaluddin concentrated his discussion mostly on recent labor unrest in the RMG sector for determining minimum wage. He mentioned that minimum wage issue is a crucial issue. We have to think of it seriously whether wage enhancement will improve productivity.

## **Open Discussion**

### **Mr. Nurul Anowar, President, Bangladesh Sromogibi Kendra (Labour Union of Bangladesh)**

#### *On RMG*

Mr. Anowar pointed out that we must not alienate the recent labor uprising in RMG by labeling it as a separate and foreign provocative incident. He identified three underlying reasons for this uprising

- Wages, that remains stagnant for past 10 years but life expense have almost doubled in the meantime.
- Almost no factory practice negotiation about wages or other facilities with workers, rather factory management dictates it in authoritarian manner. This attitudinal problem has failed to generate ownership among workers.
- Practice of forced overtime.

He also shared two incidents about how factory owners have jeopardized the workers attempt to establish union.

#### *On Poverty Reduction*

We must emphasize on the increase of income of workers and employment creation as the measurement of poverty reduction. According to his opinion, if export oriented industries generate enough employment but failed to increase the income of workers, then virtually the local economy will not sustain poverty reduction and development in long run. In addition, people will not get enough motivation to invest in increasing their skill.

Therefore, the country as a LDC must not liberalize all its sectors for outer-world competition. He specifically mentioned about agro processing, jute, bakery, furniture and some other highly labour intensive industries. If necessary we must push those sectors in their drive to productivity increase, modernization and finally in export promotion. After achieving necessary competitiveness, we may liberalize those sectors. Here Government may play the role as catalyst like ensuring two years protection to any sector that are determined to increase their competitiveness significantly.

### **Dr. Enamul Haque, Professor of Economics, East West University**

#### *On RMG*

- We must emphasize on human capital development in measuring poverty reduction and the productivity of local economy. Therefore, how RMG have affected the human capital scenario is important. RMG now contribute a significant part of manufactured employment, but it failed in alluring its employees to invest in skill development. This is a crucial factor in future FDI attraction, as FDI always search highly productive people at reasonable wages, not low productive people at low wages.
- Government failed to handle the ongoing wage bargaining process in proper manner and lacked the positive attitude. He mentioned the wage bargaining process of Japan and depicted how state play crucial role in mediating between workers and factories. He also expressed his anxiousness that if the process fails to create confidence among workers, it will generate a more destructive uprising than recent one.
- The paper should explain the indirect linkage of RMG in poverty reduction in more precise manner.

- We must emphasize in creating an environment of fair competition among RMG industries. This will positively induce them to focus on productivity improvement. Else, companies will turn into less competitive one and thereby drive-out from market.
- Government must take necessary action to stop the exploitation of various incentives like Bonded warehouse, back-to-back LC etc. as it is obstructing them to emphasize on productivity improvement.

*On Mobile*

- The paper needs to precisely outline the mobile sectors contribution in forward linkage sectors (mobile set companies, dealers, retailers, accessories sellers, repair shops) and backward linkage sectors (tower builder companies, signaling device companies, and others like AC, battery, furniture etc companies). Except those, it will be naïve to comment about the contribution of mobile in development and poverty reduction
- The mobile sector players are using various loopholes in the BTRC regulatory framework and thus are not playing fairly. Big companies are exploiting these opportunities in large scale, and have transformed the market uncompetitive. He also expressed that BTRC policies are profoundly inclined to FDI companies than local companies. We need to address this factor urgently.
- The tele-density information has a certain constraint – many Sim-cards are not active. Therefore, as long as companies do not share about the number of active Sim-card, we will fail to decide about the real tele-density of the country.

**Mr. Ali Ahmed, Former Member, National Board of revenue (NBR)**

*On RMG*

- If we consider inflation and adjust it with nominal salary, then we found that real wage of workers declined to an unbearable stage. Let alone the salary increase, improvement of working environment and management behavior, Government even failed to ensure timely payment of salary in RMG industries.
- The mantra – ‘High wage leads to high productivity’ is also true for RMG factories. However, it is also true that as long as RMG factories play in low value segments, productivity will not be a major concern for them. Therefore, government needs to design necessary policy to lure RMG factories toward high value segment and increase productivity.

*On Mobile*

- Mobile sector has experienced net outflow of foreign currency, a recently published report tells that. Is it benefiting for our economy? No. Therefore, government must and promptly initiate necessary policy so that companies can invest their profits in other sectors also.

**Ms. Shaila khan, UNDP**

*On RMG*

- The only survival mantra for RMG in long run is to diversify its product basket and climb toward high value segments. RMG factories must initiate the process first. They will make an outline with definite and binding target. Then they should ask government for necessary help. RMG industry must play proactive role in their growth process.
- Government must control inflation and pressurize RMG factories to increase the wage of workers.

*On Mobile*

- It is true that mobile is helping the farmers and small producers in seeking better price. However, the main problem about getting fair price of farmers and small producers depend on the marketing chain, its dynamic structure and the rules defined by large players. Until and unless we redefined this chain, farmers will not get fair price, even they know final outlet price.

**Mr. A.Q Siddiqui, Country Representative, Habib Bank**

*On RMG*

- RMG Industry owners own more than 80% of private banks currently in the country. Therefore, large factories do not face any financial scarcity/unavailability problem. However, they are reluctant to diversify their product and move into high value segment. The reason is easy - cheap labor exploitation. Therefore, increase wage rate will push them to consider about moving into high segment and productivity. As long as wage rate remains stagnant, there is no benefit for RMG industries to emphasize on productivity. Thus, increase of wage rate is highly benefiting for the industry.

*On Mobile*

- Mobile has considerable influence on changing the culture, child characteristics, and crime.

**Khondoker Shakhwat Ali, Research Fellow, PPRC**

*On RMG and Mobile*

- Both papers have neglected the role of state in the development of this sector. State's role is not only limited into facilitating environment for the growth of these sectors, they also must specify the rule for distribution of accumulated wealth due to growth. Since long, we are emphasizing on the first one. However, time has come to judge the second function of state. As state failed to execute the second function, poverty reduction has declined in recent years and the wealth is being accumulating into few hands.
- State has failed to link micro and macro economy properly as it lacks the necessary vision in industrial development. We must emphasize in this segment also and help the state to build its vision.

**Dr. Narayan Chandra Nath**, Research Fellow, BIDS

*On RMG*

- For various repressive policies of RMG owners, feeling of belongingness has not developed among workers. If it continues, then there might be more danger waiting in near future. The new upsurge will be more vast, destructive and longer term.
- We must mark out the price and non-price competitiveness deliberately. Then we must build a vision based on these findings, rather than looking into other countries policies.

**Mr. Zillul Hye Razi**, European Union

*On RMG*

- We need to demystify the present statistics about number of factories and workers in RMG sector of the country. Even BGMEA likes to play hide and seek with these numbers. This creates overwhelming problems to policy and trade analysts to reach into any concrete decisions.
- We must be aware of NAMA in WTO. After passed, it will reduce the tariff on apparel and shoes close to zero. Then we will not be in a better stance in EU market. This has massive implications on our RMG industries as it is now enjoying duty free GSP facilities in EU under 'Everything But Arms' agreement.

**Mr. Feroz Ahmed**, Secretary, Ministry of Commerce and the Chief Guest in the occasion

While delivering his speech Mr. Ahmed extended his sincere thanks to the organizer for taking initiative of bringing together the learned audience to share their ideas and opinions on such an important issue like trade liberalization and poverty linkage on two important sectors: RMG and Cellular Phone.

He mentioned that Bangladesh made significant progress in the fight against poverty. Bangladesh today is definitely out of the shadow of famine. Vibrant non-government sectors as well as private sector bodies have been working out side by side with the government for fighting against poverty. He pointed out four major factors contributed to attain average growth rate of around 5% per annum over the last 15 years i) Facilitation of private sector growth through various fiscal and monetary incentives, ii) elimination of anti export bias policy and implementation of export promotion policies, iii) trade liberalization through progressive reduction of tariff rate and elimination of non-tariff barriers and iv) promotion and attraction of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in various sectors. However, trade liberalization is believed to be the significant contributing factor and has made some significant positive spillover effect to other three factors. The liberalization programme may be considered to have been successful in boosting up exports, which in turn leads to poverty alleviation through increased employment and income, he added.

Finally, Honorable Secretary expressed his gratitude to the organizer for inviting him in the national dialogue and Dr. Atiur declared the closure of the dialogue thanking all for their active participation.

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