

## The Way Ahead

The preparation of District Human Development Report for a district with multi-dimensional complexities like South 24 Parganas is a considerably complicated exercise in itself. Apart from its sheer size and large population, the varied topography with urban metropolitan living at one end of the district bordering Kolkata and people's struggle for coping with very uncompromising nature at the other end in Sundarban makes the task a highly difficult one. The expectations of the people of different regions are different; the threats they face are entirely different from one region to another or for that matter even from one block to another. It is thus almost impossible to make policy recommendations at the macro level for the district as a whole.

It is expected that a Human Development Report would identify the problems associated with human development in the reference area and offer some suggestions towards rectifying those problems. In South 24 Parganas - a district characterized by heterogeneity - an ideal policy framework would require prescribing policies for each block separately, given the differences in the topography, threats, scope and aspirations of the people. The measures

required for Thakurpukur-Maheshtala – an almost entirely urban block located on the fringe of Kolkata Metropolis – cannot be and should not be same as those required for Gosaba – a block comprising islands with no direct road connectivity to mainland. Unfortunately, such a disaggregated micro level analysis is beyond the scope of this report.

The objective of this concluding chapter is to reflect on some general guidelines that we hope will help the district in traversing the future path. This is an unenviable task, knowing fully well that without more detailed policy recommendations at the block level taking into account the characteristics and problems faced by each individual block, any general policy is bound to have limited impact on the human development of the individual blocks, at least in the short-term. To make this exercise a successful one, it is imperative to arrive at an integrated participatory coordinated plan of development of each different area, based on the general guidelines found in this report. An essential step in this direction is to ensure consolidation from the grassroots level.

Though a large section of people in

South 24 Parganas still depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, in the post-liberalization era agriculture has become relatively unremunerative after the gradual withdrawal of farm subsidies. This is particularly so in South 24 Parganas with majority of its agricultural land being monocrop in absence of proper irrigation facilities. The ground water irrigation that has been so successful elsewhere in the state did not succeed here because of high salinity. The lack of irrigation facilities also has limited the labour absorbing power of agriculture denying rural people very important employment opportunities. This needs to be taken care of immediately. Large amounts of rainwater run off to sea through different river channels during the monsoon, while in the Rabi season water for irrigation is scarce. A major irrigation project with large water storage tanks and inter connected network of canals can change the agricultural landscape of the district permanently – particularly for the mainland blocks. Rainwater can be stored during monsoon and later used during dry season, enabling multicropping and significant crop diversification. This would be a major step forward towards creating additional employment potential in agriculture as well as making agriculture remunerative.

Horticulture offers considerable

potential for employment generation and productivity growth in the district. Bishnupur I and II blocks are well known for their nurseries. Guava and lichee of Baruipur, mango of Bhangar, watermelon of Kakdwip and Sagar, chilli of Patharpratima are widely known for their good quality. But absence of local processing industries and poor storage and marketing facilities due to lack of rural infrastructure sometimes lead to huge loss on the part of the cultivators. Development of infrastructure and promotion of local agro-based industries are required to provide the farmers with incentives to cultivate these crops. Amtala Food Park is one such initiative in the right direction. But, similar projects need to be promoted on an urgent basis.

Being a riverine district with almost a third of the population living in islands of the southern Sundarban blocks, fishing is a natural occupational choice for a large part of the population. Besides river and sea fishing activities carried out by a large number of fishermen, the district has had both saline and sweet water fisheries for a long time. But unfortunately, only about 40 percent of the area available for pisciculture in the district is presently being utilized for the purpose. This is a serious under-utilization considering the natural propensity and specialization of the people of the district in this particular

profession. This needs to be improved upon by providing appropriate incentives. Fishermen's cooperatives may be formed and linked with other government sponsored schemes to provide these cooperatives with easy access to technology, bank loans and training for members. This has a very large employment potential in the district not just for male but also for female job-seekers. One such success story in the district is in the case of ornamental fisheries. Many self help groups in Bishnupur I and Bishnupur II blocks have very successfully taken up ornamental fishing activities with encouragement from the district administration. One advantage of fishing as a livelihood choice is that there is no dearth of demand. But care must be taken to develop appropriate infrastructure like refrigerated storage facilities and fishing ports for promoting sea and river fishing. In Sundarbans, women and children are involved in large numbers in prawn seed collection from the rivers for the inland fisheries. This is a very hazardous occupation with high degree of associated physical risk. Moreover, environmentalists have pointed out that this activity, if goes on unchecked, may seriously damage the marine biodiversity of Sundarbans besides eroding embankments of the islands rapidly. This is a very serious concern and needs to

be addressed immediately, possibly by identifying a window within the year during which the prawn seed collection from the river would be legally prohibited.

Though South 24 Parganas is presently a predominantly rural district, it enjoys a strong manufacturing presence in the eastern bank of Hooghly river from Maheshtala - Budge Budge upto Falta. The growth of industrial output in the district has been higher than that of the state by a significant extent in the recent past. If infrastructure – particularly good roads and industrial power - can be properly developed, the district has the potential to become a very attractive destination for new industrial investment given its proximity to Kolkata. That the district has easy access to the main waterway of the state – the Hooghly river – can only help the matter further. Presently, the state of West Bengal is going through a process of industrialization. New investments – both domestic as well as foreign – are coming to the state. It is thus imperative that the advantages of the district are promoted aggressively to attract investment. Potential areas for industrial establishments need to be identified and developed as quickly as possible. Otherwise, a very good opportunity to alter the livelihoods of many may go begging.

Our analysis shows that beyond any

degree of reasonable doubt the standard of living in an area is determined by its infrastructure – both physical as well as financial. It is unfortunate that the district as a whole is lagging behind in this aspect. The state of infrastructure worsens as one moves farther away from Kolkata. This has increased the regional disparity in the quality of life. This requires immediate attention with specific geographical targeting for infrastructural development to properly utilize the limited resources available to the Government. Sundarban region, where the existing infrastructural facilities are in a precarious state must be given top priority.

The achievement of the district in education is encouraging. But there is no scope of complacency and much is yet to be done. This is the time to consolidate and to make sincere efforts to improve upon aspects that were not properly attended to. The achievement of the district in reducing illiteracy and promoting female literacy is commendable. But the gender gap is still alarmingly high for many blocks. Literacy rates for some backward pockets and for some underprivileged communities are still unacceptably low. Thus there is need of geographical, community-based targeting of literacy programmes. Gender friendly non formal institutions and literacy centres should be established to reduce

gender gap in literacy.

The performance in school enrolment clearly gives a sign that the district in near future will achieve the target of universal enrolment. But drop out rates at all stages of education are alarmingly high. Female enrolment falls drastically when the age of marriage is approached. Thus there is need to provide some incentive to retain girl students. The system of mid day meal has well known positive impact on retention. Now that the programme is extended to the upper primary level, a positive impact on retention can be expected. Introduction of financial grant can be effective to retain girls at a higher level of education. The importance of female literacy in human development cannot be overemphasized. Increase in female literacy has significant positive impact on aggregate literacy, dropout, and on maternal and child health. The involvement of community and local Panchayat can be effective in reducing drop out of girl children.

Proliferation of educational infrastructure at the primary level is better compared to educational institutions at a higher level. Student teacher ratio and number of students per school increase substantially in secondary and higher secondary schools when compared to a primary school. Unavailability of college level infrastructure in the district is a well

known obstacle to higher education particularly in remote blocks of Sundarban. Thus along with consolidation of achievement at the primary level, proliferation of higher level institutions should be sincerely targeted. The quality aspects of education by improving physical infrastructure, full time teaching personnel should get attention.

Government programmes on education aim at improvement of educational scenario of the district. The successful running of adult education centres has resulted in eradication of adult illiteracy to a large extent in recent years. These programmes cannot be sustained if they are not linked with employment generation opportunities. Continuing Education Centres provide such employment opportunities. But there is need to converge the literacy programmes with other developmental programmes, particularly those geared towards employment generation.

The analysis of the health situation in South 24-Parganas shows that there is scope for considerable improvement in almost all areas. The existing health infrastructure in most blocks does not satisfy existing national norms. This creates a tremendous pressure on blocks where the local population relies heavily on public health facilities. A rather disturbing feature associated with public health in the district

is that the reliance on public health facilities is low except in Sundarban. This particular feature indicates the lack of faith of the people in public health facilities wherever alternatives are available even if they are more expensive. In Sundarban, absence of private health facilities compel the people to flock to the state-run health centres. This is a very serious issue. Underutilization of public health facilities in a district like South 24 Parganas means a large wastage of public funds. To restore people's faith in public health, measures towards quality improvement in public health centres are urgently required. These include manning of the health centres with doctors and trained para-medical personnel, adequate supply of life-saving drugs, maintenance of a certain degree of cleanliness etc. It may also be necessary to explore how Private-Public Partnerships can be effectively utilized.

Apart from health care infrastructure and its accessibility, problems relating to maternal and child health also require serious attention, particularly in view of their implications for subsequent generations. These problems cannot be solved through a 'top-bottom' approach, but require building community awareness and involvement. NGOs can play an important role in this respect. The ICDS also has a major potential role. Gram panchayats have

to be involved more actively. The scarcity of Female Health Assistants and trained Dais, and their non-availability in the locality on a 24-hour basis are institutional impediments to improving the situation with respect to maternal health. This problem must be addressed by the Health Department. The state Government must also realize the economic importance of health and release financial resources accordingly.

There must also be regular review and evaluation of existing programmes in the area of child and maternal health. Unfortunately, the lack of a Universal Surveillance Data System renders the task of evaluation difficult. This is an institutional reform that should be given high priority by the State.

Sundarban blocks – specifically the island blocks - are very vulnerable to natural disasters. Idiosyncratic risks arising from embankment damages are on the rise despite huge mitigation expenditures. Conditions of Basanti and Gosaba are fast deteriorating. Community institutions for collectively managing embankments are missing in Sundarban. The building up of such institutions for embankment management and linking them with other government programmes to provide the proper incentives may help people in more effectively coping with embankment

erosion. After all, the mud embankments for the islands were built and maintained for decades by the ancestors of the present population. Thus the effective use of the indigenous technology and local knowledge of the rivers and the tides may actually help in sustaining the ecological balance. The forest protection committees and eco development committees should be involved in creating mangrove cover for the embankments which is absolutely essential for sustenance.

Even among thirteen Sundarban blocks, Basanti, Gosaba, Kultali, Patharpratima and Sagar should be treated differently from the others. These blocks are primarily island blocks with hardly any surfaced road network and electricity for the majority of areas. Recently, there has been some improvement in mainland connectivity in Basanti and Kultali with building of a couple of bridges, but overall the situation is still grim. The poor state of infrastructure in the island blocks has increased the people's forest dependence in absence of alternatives. As a result, the ecological balance in Sundarban – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – gets adversely affected. The stakes here are much higher. The development of livelihoods in these blocks is essential for sustainability of Sundarban. The funds required need to be provided by the State

and the Central Governments. Even global funding may be arranged in conserving the Sundarban in a sustainable way. The role of the Non Governmental Organizations must be recognized and they may be given a space to work side by side the state agencies in this endeavour.

Given the limited resources at the disposal of the state, involvement of NGOs and other civil society organisations in the process of human development becomes inevitable. In South 24 Parganas, NGOs have a long history of working side by side the state in extending development to the most vulnerable. The Tagore Society for Rural Development started its operation in Rangabelia island of Gosaba in 1969 and its success in changing the scenario of the village is internationally recognized. In recent times, a very large number of NGOs have begun functioning in the district

particularly in the fields of disaster relief, and capacity building in health and education. Trafficking of women and high incidence of child labour are two areas of real concern for the district. The NGOs have played a commendable role in addressing these issues. The NGOs are also involved in building of social consensus against dowry and child marriage practices, as well as in the rehabilitation of victims of crimes against women, with minimal funding support from the state. There is nevertheless considerable social space for the involvement of NGOs in evaluation and monitoring activities relating to the developmental programmes administered by the Panchayats and the State Government and in building and nurturing community groups like forest protection committees and eco development committees in Sundarban areas.

