

# **NATIONAL POLICY REVIEW FORUM FOR REVISITING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PRE-ELECTION TASK FORCE REPORTS**

## **PROPOSAL**

### **I. BACKGROUND**

Bangladesh's economy and society are currently passing through an important phase of its national development. Unfinished macro-economic and structural reforms initiated in the early 1990s are weakening Bangladesh's economic prospects. Although the government has made some positive policy announcements and preparation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is in progress, a coherent and feasible medium term plan for economic reforms geared towards meeting the challenges facing the economy is yet to be articulated. This situation can be improved through realistic policy reforms designed and implemented through a broad based participatory process. Such a process will serve to establish a degree of ownership over the policy agenda by involving representatives of the stakeholders along with policy-makers in the design of public policy. Policies which originate from such a consultative process are likely to be more acceptable to the people and are, consequently, likely to make implementation easier. People of Bangladesh are now more cautious and seek greater accountability from policy-makers through a variety of institutional efforts by civil society organizations involving development NGOs, citizens groups, and professional bodies. The media is also very active in exposing various policies to public scrutiny and are also providing opportunities as well as platforms for expression of public opinion.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has been playing an important role in undertaking public policy analysis and advocacy for influencing public opinion by creating a platform for participatory policy making in the country. In order to expose the outcomes of development policies to greater public accountability, CPD has been preparing an annual Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD) since 1995. Through its Trade Policy Programme, CPD is studying the impact of the trading regime which is being negotiated in the WTO on the economy of Bangladesh. CPD is, in the process, trying to influence the government's policies in view of the risks and opportunities stemming from these developments. CPD also carries out policy-relevant research on frontier development issues which include Regional Integration and Infrastructure Development, Governance and Policy Reforms, Population and Sustainable Development, Investment Promotion and Enterprise Development. Through dialogues and research, CPD has been also trying to mobilise public opinion in support of regional cooperation in South Asia, more particularly in the area of optimum use of common resources such as energy and water, transport and communication facilities.

As part of its ongoing tradition of promoting greater domestic ownership over policy design and evaluation of its outcomes, prior to the National Parliament Elections 2001, CPD took an initiative to prepare a set of Policy Briefs which set out an actionable agenda for a newly elected government. The programme was developed to

conscientise political parties during the election campaign regarding important issues of public concern, and to focus on possible policy alternatives. Initiated in June 1999, the programme was implemented through a highly interactive process. The Policy Briefs are envisaged as CPD's contribution to good governance in Bangladesh and promotion of greater ownership over the policy agendas following the organisation of six priority setting Regional Multi-stakeholder Meetings, to address the issues demanding urgent attention. These Policy Briefs include, amongst others, macroeconomic policies (e.g. budgetary discipline and fiscal programmes), development and governance of the energy sector, agricultural development and the rural economy, industrial and trade policy, poverty eradication and employment generation, gender equality and women's empowerment, education policy, health and population sector policy, governance, and land administration.

The draft Policy Briefs prepared by the Task Forces were presented at eight Regional Dialogues and subsequently at a National Policy Forum organised by the CPD, in collaboration with two leading national dailies The Daily Star and Prothom Alo. Inaugurated by the then President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, CPD's National Policy Forum, during August 20-22, 2001, provided a unique non-partisan platform to bring together representatives of political parties and members of civil society to discuss policies and policy alternatives. CPD's efforts drew over 2000 participants at the 16 sessions of the National Forum. The CPD Task Force reports have successfully identified the mechanisms and pathways for broad based development, good governance, empowering the poor and women through market and non-market channels. Task Force Reports were extensively disseminated to, amongst others, the members of the current Cabinet of Ministers. Observers are of the view that the electoral debate was much more informed during this parliament election and the media gave more importance to the policy debates and policy discussion. The activities related to the Policy Briefs may have contributed to this process.

The Task Force Reports are currently under publication in a single volume. However, publication of the reports is not an end itself. Participants at the dialogues emphatically indicated that CPD should carry forward the message of the dialogues to the concerned institutes/policy makers. They were also of the view that CPD should be vigilant in this regard and must ensure that policy prescriptions formulated on accumulated knowledge and expertise of more than 2000 people should be put to substantive use. Therefore, it is appropriate to review the actions taken by the parliament and the government based on the policy recommendations originated from a genuine domestically owned participatory exercise. Thus, the proposed National Policy Review Forum is really a continuum of CPD's activism in public policy formulation and advocacy.

## **II. THE PROGRAMME DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY**

### **(a) The Programme**

The present government which came to power in the 2001 parliamentary election has already completed a year in office. During this period the government has taken a variety of policy and executive actions including a 100-days programme, preparation of the PRSP and has already presented its first budget. However, during the last one year, prices of essentials have gone up and there had been many changes in macro-economy as well as in agricultural and industrial sector. Considering these changes, it is time to take stock of the government's stewardship of the economy in the context of the recommendations of the Task Forces organised by CPD during the pre-election policy briefs reviewed by a national level Policy Review Forum. Such a review of the state of the economy and its management may be expected to provide policy feedbacks to the policymakers whilst establishing their accountability against their electoral commitments. Such an exercise will further strengthen the process of establishing greater ownership over public policy not only by the government but by citizens and civil society over the policy discourse. Such an initiative will hopefully make the policy makers more sensitive to the concern of their electorate. Thus, the development policy making and implementation process would demonstrate greater participation, accountability and transparency all of which together constitute some of the key elements of good governance.

The proposed National Policy Review Forum will revisit the recommendations of the sixteen Task Forces and will review the implementation status of the recommendations in relation to the public actions of the government. A thorough review of the IPRSP, which is expected to be released before the end of this year, will also be brought within the purview of the Review Forum which would enhance the credibility of the preparation of the PRSP. The Review Forum will also suggest some modifications or mid-course corrections in the direction of the economy which are essential considering the changes in global and national scenarios facing Bangladesh. The envisaged Review will accordingly concentrate on agendas/recommendations which are deemed to be feasible and doable. The expected output from the review will be available before the Aid Group meeting in April 2003 which makes the timing of this exercise appropriate.

### **(b) Scope of Work**

The sixteen issue-specific Task Forces constituted by CPD in 2001 will be reconvened by CPD National Policy Review Forum to be convened with the participation of broad cross section of civil society organisations which would include development NGOs, citizens groups, professional bodies, policy-makers, high level government officials and academics. The review and deliberations of the Task Forces will be presented before a national level dialogue. To ensure broad based ownership over this process, regional dialogues will be organised in a number of major cities of the countries, prior to the National Forum to be held in the capital.

Each of the Task Forces will hold three meetings and undertake the following five activities:

(a) identification of relevant recommendations incorporated by the ruling party in its election manifesto, in the 100 days programme of the government and in other subsequent policy documents, (b) review the implementation status of the commitments and programmes formulated, (c) Examine the extent to which the recommendations of the Task Forces were incorporated into the ruling party manifesto and have since been implemented by the government, (d) provide recommendations and policy suggestions for mid-course corrections in public policy, (d) validation of the recommendations and suggestions of the forum, and (e) dissemination and awareness raising activities to build a coalitions of stakeholders in support of particular policies.

The Task Forces as well as the National Policy Review Forum will undertake their activities through multi-stakeholder participation, and ensure a greater sense of ownership with continuous feedback from the field to the National Forum. In each of the Task Forces the best available qualitative and quantitative techniques will be used for analysis and synthesis of data. The reports will document public pronouncements made by the government and review the outcomes of such pronouncements. Thus the reports will mainly be based on ongoing discussion, desk research, literature review, policy mapping, key informant debriefing and some primary investigations, where needed.

The reports will be used as background papers for national level dialogues to be held over two days in Dhaka, and will draw upon inputs from various stakeholders through dialogues, and consultation before its finalization. Feedbacks obtained through these dialogues will be incorporated into the final reports. The final Reports will be disseminated to parliamentarians, civil society and stakeholders in a reader friendly format, which can be used to mobilize civil society around particular issues. CPD will utilise its experience as well as access to bring together the critical stakeholders to ensure that its Reports do not remain academic documents, but act as a critical input to Bangladesh's policy discourse.

### **(c) Partnership and collaboration**

The Review Reports will be prepared by a small group of experts mobilised by CPD for this task. These experts will be drawn from leading professionals in Bangladesh, many of whom are Fellows of CPD. For consultations, dialogues and dissemination purposes, a broader partnership with civil society organizations along with collaboration with the print and electronic media would be established. The organization of regional and national dialogues as well as preparation of investigative reports would be carried out in collaboration with two leading dailies of the country, The Daily Star and Prothom Alo. CPD will also draw on other specialised civil society organisations and NGOS for providing expertise and institutional support on some specific issues of interest such as improving the quality of education where specialised NGOs such Education Watch will be drawn in as partners in this enterprise. Such a partnership process will allow for a multi-stakeholder participatory process of public policy audits.

The final Review Reports will be prepared after the conclusion of the dialogues with concerned interest groups, and will take into account the recommendations of the dialogues. During the dialogues CPD will bring on board relevant constituencies of policymakers, parliamentarians, the business community, leaders of major political parties, media, development partners, students, trade unions, NGO leaders and other representative of civil society. Subsequently, the document will be validated through a broad-based public dialogue.

**(d) Schedule of implementation**

The programme will be implemented over a period of four months beginning December, 2002.

Activities	2002-03				
	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
<b>Remobilization of Task Forces</b>	***				
<b>Preparation of Reports</b>					
Key informant debriefing, policy mapping		***	***		
Report writing		***	***	***	
<b>Validation and Dissemination</b>					
Dialogues			***	***	
Publication			***	***	***
Dissemination				***	***

**May 2003 is preserve for the submission of final report.**

**(e) Dissemination/ Follow-up**

The final versions of the Review Reports will be published in a reader-friendly format in both English and Bangla. These Reports will eventually be disseminated to a much wider audience using both the printed as well as electronic media including the internet. The Reports will also be used to initiate dialogues at the local and grassroots level, where appropriate, as part of a broader advocacy campaign in support of relevant policy issues.