

Book Review

Pakistan Human Condition Report 2003, Centre for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution (CRPRID), Planning Commission, Islamabad, UNDP, UNOPS, November 2003, pps 264.

It is becoming obvious that all large multi-ethnic societies, after attaining the beatific status of development, lose interest in removing poverty. The undying myth of development, that it will remove all poverty forever from all corners of the world, now lies shattered. It comes somewhat as a surprise that so many people believed it for so many years with a sense of naivety and innocence. Even affluent economies such as the US have not been able to rid their societies entirely of the plague of poverty from within their borders.

That said, it appears that somebody somewhere means business. The Centre for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution (CRPRID), an autonomous body with its own board of directors, has published its rather glossy *Human Condition Report 2003*, the second in its series. The main intent of the Report, as stated in the Forward, is to guide and influence policy makers and be an autonomous tool for monitoring and evaluating the progress made towards achieving the targets laid out in the Poverty Reduction Strategy of Pakistan as well as the Millennium Development Goals.

Tariq Husain, in the first chapter synthesises the analysis in the rest of the Report as well as presents additional analysis of the existing information for a policy maker's perspective. The next chapter is an elaboration upon the quality of the HIES/PIHS dataset of the FBS as well as PSES panel dataset of PIDE. Also included in the Report is an extensive analysis of HIES data and recommendations for policy makers and researchers. Then there is an analysis of the PSES data with insights both about the dynamics of poverty and its likely determinants.

AR Kemal provides coverage of all major studies on Income Distribution during the preceding fifty years. He highlights the vital link of poverty and income distribution policies and proposes a research agenda in line with this. This is followed by a lengthy chapter on malnutrition, disease and poverty links and the intergenerational dimension of this set of issues which to date has not received the priority it deserves in Pakistan. There is an enlightening chapter on the growth of public expenditure and its performance in a historical perspective, as well as the weakness of the fiscal relations with the idea of tracing the causes of the widening social gap.

The chapter by Tariq Husain includes a useful delineation of the poor to form the Poverty Spectrum, categorising them between the extremely poor, the chronically poor, the transitory poor, the transitory vulnerable, the transitory non-poor and the non-poor. Yet one has reservations about the distinction between extremely and chronically poor, because after all don't both the terms imply the same thing? Or perhaps this is but a question of semantics and not that significant. He also presents a logical though debatable framework for various paths on how to escape poverty, for instance the prime mover being education and higher wages thereafter. Policy lessons are spelt out and the chapter in its entirety is comprehensive with a holistic account of the poverty problem.

Dr. Tahir discusses how the data bases for poverty analysis themselves have been made a subject of controversy and attempts to place the issue in a proper perspective, arguing that what was flawed was the basis of raising the controversy, not the dataset. He further presents a historical backdrop to the study of poverty and the development of income and expenditure surveys with this intent.

Noshin Hussain in her piece offers certain very pertinent policy suggestions such as the need to undertake every possible effort to make available a reliable dataset for the estimation of poverty. In her opinion, it is the rural poor that should be the target group of population control policies while the rest of the population can benefit from the improvement in the quality of the population through better health facilities and cleaner environment, etc. She seems confident that with the implementation of certain measures and policy interventions, it is possible to reduce poverty by half in Pakistan by the year 2015 in accordance with the Millenium Development Goals.

In the next chapter the assertion is made, and rightly so, that the dynamics of poverty, movement into and out of poverty, have rarely been examined in Pakistan. A discussion on the socio-economic characteristics of the sampled households is given as well as a discussion of a poverty transition matrix showing movement into and out of poverty. Poverty transition and changes in household consumption are reported and factors associated with the poverty transition examined.

It is Dr. Kemal's contention in his piece that the increase in poverty should have resulted in more and not less studies on income distribution as the case has been. His study examines various indices of income inequality. His arguments throughout are substantiated with extensive and reliable data. Various testable hypotheses are presented in the hope that future research in

Pakistan will take up these studies. His concluding remark is that whereas several studies estimate the incidence of income inequalities, the reasons behind rising or falling income levels are generally unexplored territory.

The following chapter on Nutrition, a Factor for Poverty Eradication and Human Development takes considerable effort to plough through, however inherently useful, as there is considerable repetition and the author appears to belabour the point. However, the redeeming feature is the innovative and visibly effective diagrams and figures interspersed throughout the chapter.

The chapter on public expenditure presents a historical overview as well as touches on almost each and every aspect of the subject such as expenditure on defence, debt servicing, social, community and economic services. In his policy recommendations the author contends public expenditure may not be the only way to deliver certain services or to achieve particular objectives and that private spending may have a role to play. Further that increasing budgetary allocations for economic and social services may not be the only or most effective way to reduce poverty. Improving the effectiveness of spending through better allocation of public resources and better quality of public service delivery to the poor needs far more focus. Last but certainly not least, the statistical tables at the end of the Report are useful especially given the paucity of solid data in economies such as ours.

As an after thought, it would be worth pointing out here as the Indian scholar Ashis Nandy does, that poverty is not destitution. The two terms are often collated or collapsed by intellectuals and activists. It cannot be denied that the traditional safety net now increasingly lies in tatters. More and more a sizeable section of the poor in the world are becoming destitute and Pakistan is no exception. Development may have removed poverty in many societies, but it has done so by expanding the proportion and the absolute number of the destitute. And this reality should not be forgotten by our policy makers. If, and it is a big if, only some part of what is recommended in this Report is implemented in letter and spirit, the poor in this country might just not be compelled to suffer in the living nightmare of poverty and destitution.