

rise of economic inequality in the U.S. has undermined our democracy? Does the U.S. political system no longer respond to the demands and interests of average citizens? The struggle to sustain even the partial U.S. social welfare state is a matter simultaneously for outrage and careful academic analysis. The story of Food Stamps can provide a critical starting point for insights about the current state of the American political character.

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Palash Kamruzzaman (2014), *Poverty Reduction Strategy in Bangladesh: Rethinking Participation in Policy Making*. Bristol: Policy Press. £75.00, 224, hbk.
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This is a well-titled book which focuses on the poverty reduction strategies in Bangladesh and looks into how the elites behaved during the PRSP exercise. It tries to give an empirical evidence on how participation was practiced in making the PRSP in Bangladesh. The author also argues that it will not be implemented effectively too (p. 170). At the same time it has to be accepted that everything cannot be incorporated in one policy document (which the author himself admits, p. 178). According to the author, PRSPs are the latest in the series of previous prescriptions like HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative, Country Assistance Strategies (CASs), Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) etc. For example, PRSP proposed reducing subsidies in agriculture and privatizing the state-owned industries (p. 124). To him, a universal neo-liberal growth-based model has been imposed accompanied by a sweetener called participation. He argues that a major weakness in the approach is its lack of importance to the local variation (environmental, accessibility, composition of communities, culture, etc.). (p. 174). The author argues that in addition to aid dependency the poor countries do not have a fair and balanced trade relationship with the developing countries.

Some points made in the book are sometimes weak. For example, the author says that there is a common presumption that civil society is clearly a good thing (p. 41). It is not clear how this conclusion was drawn. In some cases, the lure of international funds has drawn internationally savvy entrepreneurs to form organizations that are little more than a personal fiefdom dominated by a group of individuals who have become, in effect, career civil society leaders. As a result, the organizations remain shallow, dependent on the ideas, contacts, and vision of one leader or a small set of leaders, thus retarding their broader institutional development. Many of the CSOs that donors support in the name of democracy are themselves not internally democratic. CSOs sometime work on single issues for a limited constituency. Ultimately, it is the political parties that build broader collective identities, mobilize citizens around the broader themes of politics, balance competing interests and provide a political/electoral counterweight to the concentration of power by single leaders. Ironically, CSOs are increasingly filling the gaps left by political parties, but civil society cannot replace a party system and in fact increases the need for strong political parties. Most powerful CSOs are more intellectual, capital, city-based, donor-funded and linked with Transnational CSOs. They usually find it easier to mobilize external funding; they have staff with relevant management and communication skills; and therefore do not need to mobilize large domestic constituencies.

There is a good discussion on the dollarization of poverty. He has made a detailed discussion on the weaknesses of the 1US\$ international poverty line (pp. 58–59). However, it is currently the most convenient way of defining poverty. The author argues that poverty

reduction policies made on these methods will not be likely to be effective (p. 62). Above all, there is a clear evidence of lack of political will for poverty reduction in many governments (p. 187).

There is detail discussion on the whole PRSP approach in the book. For example, the author questions how the PRSP could be owned by the country when it was prepared by a small elite who do not represent the general masses particularly the poor. To him, country ownership sounds attractive but in reality international lending agencies like the World Bank and IMF have not given up their “control, influence and interest” (p. 100). He has rightly pointed out that the government’s unwillingness to challenge the donors led the bureaucrats and consultants to work on the donors’ agenda (p. 156). These bureaucrats and consultants belong to a small group whose interests are not rooted in the country (they educate their children mostly to migrate to the west, p. 162). A good idea could be to present key components of PRSP of Bangladesh first and then discuss its weaknesses.

There is limited discussion on religion in the book. However, it has become sketchy and weak. In today’s world, religion is important and it is very important in a Muslim majority country like Bangladesh. It seems the author has failed to address the reason and its implications for multi-stream education in Bangladesh. A large number of children in Bangladesh pursue religious education (to be very specific, Islamic education). Even in the Islamic stream of education, there is a clear division. One part is funded and controlled by the state while the other is not. In the one which is controlled by the state, the students get the subsidized education and can ‘compete’ with graduates from secular schools. However, they are weaker candidates in the job market. Those who take Islamic education in the schools not recognized by the Bangladeshi state get cheap education (funded by philanthropy from home and abroad) but their employment opportunity is limited to working in the mosques and some coaching in Arabic. So, one can link the growth of Islamic education in Bangladesh with poverty and religious belief (since some parents feel that religious education is compulsory for every Muslim child). The education (i.e. the Islamic education) perhaps perpetuates the poverty cycle through its limited employment opportunities.

It is not clear what was the message from the cover of the book. It looks like a man working in the ship-breaking industry in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. One guess could be the effort to reduce poverty by harbouring this dirty industry in a country like Bangladesh where the priority is to reduce poverty at any cost, let alone considering its environmental consequences. Those who want to know how the PRSP process was practiced should read the book. Except for a few typos (pages 93, 13, 31, 211 for example) the book gives pleasant reading.

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Kyle Farmbry (ed.) (2014), *The War on Poverty: A Retrospective*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield. \$65.00, pp. 276, hbk.
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On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty, several books have taken stock of what this comprehensive initiative accomplished. Unlike others, however, such as *Legacies of the War on Poverty* (Bailey and Danziger, 2013), this book looks beyond the War, and examines a whole range of anti-poverty policies and programs, some with little or no connection to the War on Poverty.