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Agriculture reforms must to transfer resources to poor

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Comprehensive reforms in agriculture and markets are imperative to create opportunities for people deprived of resources and thereby alleviate poverty, eminent economist Prof Rehman Sobhan said yesterday.

Asset deprivation is a major reason for poverty, he said, expressing concern over emerging gap in education and health opportunities for the poor, and suggesting equal access to land, education and health for all.

Prof Sobhan, also chairman of Center for Policy Dialogue, was speaking as the chief guest at the launch of Brac Development Institute (BDI) under Brac University that will serve as a resource centre for issues on poverty and the poor and marginalized people.

Primary and Mass Education Adviser Rasheda K Chowdhury, Brac founder Fazle Hasan Abed, University Grants Commission Chairman Prof Nazrul Islam, Dhaka University Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud, Ain o Salish Kendra co-founder Hameeda Hossain and Workers Party of Bangladesh President Rashed Khan Menon and BDI Director Syed M Hashemi also spoke at the programme chaired by Brac University Vice-Chancellor Jamilur Reza Choudhury and held at Brac Centre Inn in the capital.

"We need to revisit our agrarian reform. Millions of acres of khas land is there in the country, but that is illegally occupied," Rehman Sobhan said, adding that a major research should be conducted on who actually occupied the khas land and how it could be used in productive manners.

He suggested forming cooperative societies to connect producers with the markets and creating opportunities to establish ownership of common people in commercial ventures.

Women buy cows taking loans from micro-finance institutions and sell milk to the milkmen, who actually add value and get the profit, he said, raising a question: "Why don't you investigate how these women could get together, pasteurise milk and then sell?"

There are troubles in procuring paddy where most rice is being procured from the millers, Prof Sobhan said, adding that brining the paddy producers together and making them capable of processing paddy can directly connect them to the market.

He said BDI could conduct researches how the members of Grameen Bank and Brac could be turned into shareholders of their commercial ventures. Once these members could establish their ownership, say of Brac Bank, such a model could be replicated in other commercial ventures.

He said Brac University could set an example by providing educational opportunities for talented and poor students. Citing example of Europe, he said if children of poor peasants could obtain Master's or PhD degrees, the whole society would change.

Congratulating Brac for launching BDI, Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud said it is expected that the institute would conduct analytical researches linked to policy matters and help redesign development interventions.

Over the years, focus of the researchers was the western universities, but now, with the establishment of BDI, western scholars will also come here for collaboration, which was a requirement for them for long, he said.

Prof Mahmud said learning ground realities while conducting researches is very important and that BDI should go beyond Bangladesh because development experiences in South Asia are very interesting and that a lot could be learned from these.

Expressing concern over urban poverty, UGC Chairman Prof Nazrul Islam said this is occurring due to the mistakes of the policymakers. There are 40 lakh slum dwellers in the capital and this number is on the rise, he said.

BDI, with infrastructures facilities of Brac, is at an advantageous position to conduct serious researches on poverty and development and to suggest practical solution, he said, stressing incorporating cultural development as an important issue of BDI.

Adviser Rasheda K Chowdhury said BDI must keep in mind that academic researches should be objective and have connection with the practitioners.

Rashed Khan Menon said researches must aim at improving the lives of the poor and the political leaders should be involved in this process.

Hameeda Hossain suggested incorporating human rights and gender issues in the agenda of the BDI.

Fazle Hasan Abed said BDI is expected to conduct researches, have academic and intellectual debates on poverty alleviation, advance studies, share the success stories of Bangladesh as well as Global South.

BDI planned to introduce Master's in Development Studies, certificate courses on development issues and programmes of student internship, citizenship and climate change, he said.