# Getting Priorities Straight

**Irene M. Rahman**

I thoroughly enjoyed my internship at Biogen Idec this past summer. It was a good research experience, my colleagues were very friendly, and I had the opportunity to make friends with other interns. All the employees seemed absorbed by their work and often worked long hours in their effort to advance the company's research. The best part of the week, though, was happy hour on Friday afternoon, when most of the thousand employees of the company bustled into the biggest cafeteria on the Biogen Idec campus to eat, drink and make merry at the end of a hard week of work. Thai, Mexican, Indian, Cajun—there were as many varieties of food as weeks of my internship. Not to mention the various alcohols—beer, wine, berry drinks—and snacks—Cheetos, Lays, pretzels, regular M&Ms, peanut M&Ms. We really were working hard, and deserved no less.

When I got back to college this semester, the first event organized by the Bangladeshi Students' Association, of which I am a member, was a fundraising dinner to sponsor poor children in Bangladesh, where I was born and which I identify as my mother country. The money raised was donated to a non-profit organization called Save the Children, which provides for the housing, food and education of children in rural communities of the country. Five hundred dollars can cover the cost of all of these for one child for a year. For our dinner, it was my responsibility to order the food. I called Madina Market, asked them to prepare enough to feed forty people, and then inquired for the price. The bill was three hundred dollars.

THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS!

After mumbling a thank you to the restaurant owner, I put the phone down, my mind racing with numbers. Ordering for only forty people cost three hundred dollars! I

wasn't worried about obtaining that amount for the dinner, because the Graduate Student Council had offered to cover it, given our fundraising effort. What appalled me was that the price to feed eighty people from a restaurant for one meal, only twice the number that we ordered for that day, exceeded that necessary to cover the basic needs of a child in Bangladesh for three hundred and sixty five days, one thousand and ninety five meals, twelve months of rent, two semesters of school supplies. And then I remembered happy hour. If even half the employees of Biogen Idec showed up on Friday afternoons to make merry, the cost could be $2000 or more. Every week, the company spent as much money to keep it's poor, hardworking employees happy as it would take to sponsor four poor children in Bangladesh for an entire year. I could feel the Thai, Mexican, Indian and Cajun food churning in my stomach with a vengeance.

I must admit, I wasn't always this aware, even during the six years of my childhood living in Bangladesh. I definitely noticed poverty as we drove by slum areas—the rickshaw drivers sweating in the scorching heat, the traveling vendors carrying on their heads huge straw bowls of vegetables and fish from door to door, the women and children shaping and drying cement bricks for construction. But I was too young and ignorant to care. At home, I had a TV, a computer and fancy furniture, so I had no need to step out of my childhood comfort zone and realize the families that we drove by couldn't afford to eat three times a day or buy nice clothing for their children, even after working so hard. But with experience, I could no longer turn a blind eye to such misery.

On my last trip to Bangladesh this past year, I visited a clinic newly opened in a very crowded part of Dhaka. The name of the clinic was "Paribaric Shastha" or "Family Health Clinic". As the name suggests, the clinic primarily provides services to women and young children, such as safe delivery, family planning counseling and

implementation, and vaccinations. The clinic is funded by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that direct all of their funds at no profit, so its services are affordable to middle class and poor Bangladeshis.

The aspect of the clinic that I liked best was the “satellite” program. Apart from the services provided at the regular clinic site, teams of two or three women went to remote areas where they knew the local women are unable to go to the clinic itself because of transportation costs or long working hours. The sites included various garment factories and poor but densely-populated areas. I visited one such poor area with one of the clinic teams. The streets of this site were very narrow, infested with trash, and buzzing with flies, and yet accommodated hundreds of people and even vehicles. Many of the women who came to the satellite site had at least three children, many of whom looked sickly or unhappy. The husbands of several of the women I talked to had very strenuous yet unfortunately low-paying jobs in the construction industry or in factories, allowing them only two full meals per day, and even then, meals usually lacking in protein-rich foods such as meat and eggs. That evening when I returned home and was offered a table full of a variety of dishes to choose from for dinner, I couldn't bring myself to eat much. How could I, when I knew that the families I had seen today would probably be sharing only one of those dishes among all their members?

It is upsetting to see the stark discrepancies in wealth between the rich and the poor in countries such as Bangladesh, created partly by people who just don't want to share. There are areas with three-storied mansions adjacent to slum areas where the poor are scrambling to find roof space to sleep under. Too many fast-food chains and cybercafes to count are springing up everywhere, but the number of ventures to help the poor have been limited to government and international agencies. There are many

ridiculously rich businessmen who could feed hundreds of families with only a portion of their income, but instead decide to buy one of the three Jaguars that the country can import.

Such people need to be made aware of their selfishness. The guy with the Jaguar probably feels that he deserves a reward for having worked very hard to earn the money he has. But is a bricklayer not working just as hard, or perhaps even harder, and still not being able to earn enough money to feed his hungry family three times a day? In the same respect, Biogen Idec spends hundreds of dollars to keep its employees happy at the end of every week, when all I can think is that the same amount can sponsor mutiple children in Bangladesh or Somalia or Azerbaijan for an entire year. I generally believe in moral relativism—people have their own priorities, their own philosophies to live by; however, in this case, it is completely unacceptable for the Jaguar dealer and Biogen Idec to live by the philosophy that they are their own units, such that they do not feel the need to stop living as well as they can because others may not be able to eat. Such selfish thinking has caused world poverty to persist for so many centuries—these people should convert to considering the world as a whole unit of which they are a part, so that they feel the urge to share with their fellow citizens in need.

Even among the current “sharers”, I must admit that there are differences in prioritizing. In his essay “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”, Peter Singer points out that according to the Conference Board, a nonprofit economic research organization, an American household with an annual income of $50,000 (in 2000) spends around $30,000 annually on necessities, so it should donate $20,000 a year to help the world's poor (146). I agree that this is the best cause to donate money to, so I shudder at the thought of the

billions of dollars that are spent on scientific research. I am fascinated by scientific knowledge and its applications, but while it is important to spend money to discover and manufacture drugs that can reduce the symptoms of multiple sclerosis or rheumatoid arthritis, it seems more critical to me to direct the billions of dollars spent on this research to ensure that every person on this earth is granted the basic rights of food and shelter. But perhaps someone who sees a loved one deteriorate right in front of his or her eyes from cancer and chemotherapy would add the advancement of scientific research to the top of his priority list. He would probably commit $20,000 of his annual income towards research, and none towards helping the poor.

It may also be difficult for sharers to constantly be responsible for the priorities they claim to hold. I help raise money to make sure two children in Bangladesh have food, shelter, schooling for a year, but does my priority stop being one if I use my time and money to do other things as well? When I go out to eat with my friends, buy my twentieth pair of shoes, go to the movies, I am compromising this priority. Even as I write this essay, I am contemplating whether I should go to the Hurricane Katrina Relief dinner this upcoming weekend, or stay in and catch up on my studies.

Singer probably takes too extreme a position in suggesting that people should contribute $20,000 of an income of $50,000. Using such an approach ends up being unproductive, because it is far to difficult to convince people to part with such a large percentage of their money. It may be difficult to convince others to live by my priorities, but I must continue trying. Through my experiences with poverty, I have realized that as someone with the good fortune of having all her basic rights—food, shelter, healthcare, education—fulfilled, I should try to make it a reality for others. I am proud to have developed this value system, and I recognize that “knowing where we should be going is

the first step toward heading in that direction" (Singer, 146). So though I may not be constantly committed to this priority, I find it worthwhile to strive towards that end. Likewise, I would like to make others aware of their good fortune and the need to help others less fortunate to maintain a balance in the world.

I am currently in the process of applying to medical school. If my goal of becoming a doctor is attained, I want to take a few years later in my life when I've accumulated some wealth to fund and run a clinic like the Paribaric Shastha in a developing country such as Bangladesh that is mostly cost free, so that people who can not afford the expensive prices of private health care can be safe at least in terms of health. I know that one clinic may not be able to solve too many people's problems, but no single researcher will find the cure for cancer either, so I will strive to convince others to join me in my efforts to make a difference in the lives of people who direly need it.

**Reference**

Singer, P. "The Singer Solution to World Poverty." Best American Essays 2000. Ed. Alan Lightman. Series Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 140-146.