

What need for a gender-friendly budget?

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A budget without a long-term goal and a futuristic vision is nothing more than an unimportant register book that becomes a piece of junk after the current year. In most cases, budgets announced by the governments have been like that in our country. More importantly, the announced budget is always drastically changed in the course of implementation. So, in terms of its impact on the country's economic development and growth, a budget, as it is announced first, is trivially important, and does not reflect much about the economic impact that arises from the implementation of the revised one.

Despite this trivial importance, economists of the country use the eve of the announcement of the budget for their space in electronic and non-electronic media to give their "expert" opinion. Not only Bangladesh Economic Association (probably the second most vibrant professional association in the country, assuming the first one is the Lawyers' Association) but also individual economists arranged seminars, press conferences, and symposiums to give their opinion. In most cases they point out what is missing in the budget.

The budget has two sides; income and expenditure. The finance ministry has to make an educated approximation about the total available income including the foreign help for the next financial year. Given that income, finance minister decides the sectoral expenditure for the next year. In most cases, economists mainly criticize the expenditure side of the budget without shedding any light on how the total income of the government can be increased also. Such increase is required to increase the sectoral allocations.

The nation would benefit more if the economists could point out how different is the revised budget from the originally announced one, so people could understand the degree of digression of the government from her original commitment. Most importantly, rather than just criticizing different sectoral allocations, the economists could present a clear alternative expenditure scheme which they think is more appropriate for the country.

That is yet to be accomplished in Bangladesh. This is not to deny that sometimes economists correctly point out the fundamental shortcoming of an announced expenditure scheme. But in many cases, economists' criticism of the budget is based on rhetoric or shabby ideology, rather than any simulation by using any macroeconomic model.

As it always happens, the announcement of this year's budget was also followed by a number of press conferences, seminars and

public talks. A wide range of opinions have been expressed by the economists, retired bureaucrats, and NGO bodies. They have equivocally and rightly criticized the allocations that can easily be misused or appropriated by the ministers or can be used to win the political target of the government. Besides that, the experts, as they always do, also criticized the sectoral allocations for not being congruent with the socio-economic imperatives of the country.

Any socio-economic imperative is based on ideology, information, or popular demand. Possibly one of the popular demands, at least among the urban elites, is that the budget has to be gender-friendly. A number of seminars have been organized to highlight that the announced budget is not gender-friendly. The main criticism is based on the "empowerment paradigm of development economics" and points out that enough fund has not been allocated to promote women's empowerment.

But it is not money but policy which is more important for empowerment. So the criticism of the financial budget in the context of empowerment does not make enough sense. Also, the highest emphasis on the need for a gender-friendly budget may imply that Bangladesh is doing poorly in terms of gender gap or women's empowerment. But that is not the case, as I will explain below.

A number of micro studies have been conducted on gender gap or women empowerment by local and foreign experts as the donor has always a very soft corner for gender balance in Bangladesh. Of course, what is care in our culture, sometimes seem to be a chain for women in donor's eyes. These studies, being micro in nature, do not provide any aggregate pictures of women empowerment of the country. Possibly, the only source of information for a comparative analysis and cross country comparison of women's empowerment is the indices published by World Economic Forum (2005). Is the loud and desperate cry for a gender-friendly budget warranted on the basis of that report?

Let's focus on the current situation of the women empowerment in Bangladesh. The report estimated a composite index of gender gap by using 5 individual parameters that include women's economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. It ranked 58 countries of the world on the basis of this index. The list includes mostly the developed countries, and Bangladesh has the lowest per capita GDP among them.

The countries "that have succeeded best in narrowing the gap are the Nordic countries, with Sweden standing out as the most

advanced in the world. These are followed by New Zealand (rank, 6), Canada (7), United Kingdom (8), Germany (9), and Australia (10), countries that have made considerable progress in recent decades in removing obstacles to the full participation of women in their respective societies. France (13) ranked ahead of the United States (17) among the 58 nations."

Bangladesh ranks 39 and outranks a number of European and other developed countries. The ranking of our neighbouring country India is 53. "Out of the seven predominantly Muslim nations covered by the study, Bangladesh (39) and Malaysia (40) outperform Indonesia (46), while Jordan (55), Pakistan (56), Turkey (57), and Egypt (58) occupy the bottom four ranks."

Being influenced by Amartya Sen's compelling case for the notion that societies need to see women less as passive recipients of help, and more as dynamic promoters of social transformation, the report also estimated an index for women's economic participation. In estimating this index, they use women's participation in labour force and the wage gap between male and female workers for similar works.

In this category the ranking of Bangladesh is 18, whereas the ranking of the US is 19. Therefore, the recent emphasis on the gender-friendly budget by the well-known economists, NGO workers and development practitioners should not disregard that despite many economic and social problems, Bangladesh is doing much better than many countries in terms women's economic participation.

Of course our performance in the category of women's economic opportunity is not very impressive. But this index is based on the existing public policy like maternity leave and benefit policy, and availability of childcare facilities etc. The poor index of the economic opportunity implies not any increase in allocation of funds but the implementation of new policies to help the women to be involved in economic activities. In terms of political empowerment of women, the ranking of Bangladesh is 42. In terms of educational attainment, and health and well-being the ranking is 37. Given our level of development, and per capita GDP, these performances are way better than expected.

Achieving gender equality or a gender friendly environment, however, is a slow process, since it challenges one of the most deeply entrenched of all human attitudes. It takes far more than allocation of funds in gender friendly sectors, whatever they are. An announced budget should not be held responsible and criticized for everything of our social and economic life. The problem of gender should not be conceived as an independent problem; rather it is an integral part

of our overall problem of lawlessness, discrimination against class, and insensitiveness to poverty and hunger, and requires changes in law or stated policy, and practices in the home also which can be accomplished through education of not only female but also male. A gender friendly environment is not constrained mainly by the inadequate allocation of funds in the gender-friendly sectors. For example, rape or violence against women of all kinds reflect poor law and order situation, not a gender unfriendly environment as such. Prevention of sexual slavery and forced prostitution requires the overall improvement of law and order and judicial reform.

There is no doubt that the whole idea of gender balance or gender friendly environment is very noble. Our ethical and moral standard always guides us to see a world where people should not be discriminated on the basis of sex, race, or colour. Therefore this is also very popular demand to accomplish. But before criticizing a financial budget for its alleged failure to be gender friendly, a social scientist have to think (i) if a mere increase in government allocation is the main constraint for achieving it, and (ii) whether it should be number one priority of the government to allocate funds.

It appears to me that gender-friendly budget card is growingly being overplayed to criticize the budget of the country; consequently other more important things are overlooked. For example, it cannot be denied that foreign investment is the only way to foster our economic growth. The investment climate of our country is one of the worst in the world (see World Development Report 2005). Therefore, to materialize the committed foreign investment by different foreign investors and also to attract more in future, the current budget should have reflected on the improvement of the investment climate.

Unfortunately, the budget lacks this vision, and so do most of the critics of the budget. It is well established in academia that the society of Bangladesh has accomplished a very productive normative change regarding women's right and gender equality. This accomplishment is the outcome of micro-finance and NGO activities. With this change, the benefit of economic growth will be distributed in a less skewed manner across sexes.

So our budget now should focus mainly on the growth of income, so that economic condition of all, regardless of male or female can be ameliorated. If the budget fails to do it, and the economists remain over focused with equality in a microscopic standard across sexes, then every body's share is doomed to see no real increase in future.

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Charity of the heart



Bill Gates, Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett

HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

I believe that with great wealth comes great responsibility."

So said Bill Gates on June 15 as he announced plans to phase himself out of Microsoft by 2008 to focus full-time on philanthropy and tackle the vast challenges of child mortality and disease control throughout the world.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, founded in 2000 and with assets valued at \$30 billion, has already made its mark financing projects to eradicate deadly diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, and Aids in Asia and Africa.

From Bangladesh to Botswana, the Gateses have funded programs driven by cutting-edge science to develop, test, and manufacture drugs and vaccines for diseases that kill millions of children every year.

One good thing begets another. In this case, did it ever!

Investment guru Warren Buffett, the second-richest man on the planet and a close friend of numero uno Bill Gates, pledged \$30 billion dollars to the Gates Foundation, overnight doubling its assets to \$60 billion dollars.

That's the kind of cash that can transform the world. Yet the history of philanthropy is littered with huge endowments gone horribly awry. Why should this be different?

Two words: Bill and Melinda.

The couple has turned traditional philanthropy on its head by marrying charity to accountability, management, rigour, research, and result. The qualities that allowed Gates to build Microsoft into the powerhouse

that it is today are also qualities that animate the foundation: curiosity, a relentless attention to detail and a desire to confront the most intractable problems head-on.

Of course, reducing social inequities and improving lives around the world are not the same as solving engineering and mathematical problems, however complex.

Still, applying scientific rigour on unwieldy issues of global health and universal education can only lead to more insights, as various projects that the foundation has undertaken in the direst regions of Africa show. And more insights often mean a greater chance of success in these thorny human issues, even if the initial approaches fail.

Gates modelled his philanthropic philosophy after a mathematician. In the year 1900, the great German mathematician, David Hilbert, outlined 23 major mathematical problems that he believed would dictate research in the field in the following century (about half of these problems are still unsolved). Taking a cue from Hilbert, Gates challenged scientists, physicians and health-care professionals in 2003 from around the world to draw up a list of grand challenges in global health.

After intense research and debate, investigators produced a list of 14 "global challenges" in seven categories: improve childhood vaccines (3), create new vaccines (3), control insects that transmit agents of disease (2), improve nutrition to promote health (1), improve drug treatment of infectious diseases (1), cure latent and chronic infec-

tions (2), and measure disease and health status accurately and economically in developing countries (2).

It is this laser-sharp focus on priorities that persuaded Warren Buffett to entrust his wealth to Bill and Melinda Gates, instead of creating his own foundation.

There are many high-profile personalities who are leading by example to usher in a golden and dynamic era of philanthropy. The actress Angelina Jolie, for example, donates one-third of her income to charitable causes in the poorest nations of the earth. As a goodwill ambassador for the UN Refugee Agency, she has travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Rwanda, and Ethiopia to stir the world's conscience about the plight of the hungry, the ill, and the homeless.

But what about the rest of us, neither famous nor millionaires? Is there anything we can do to touch lives less fortunate than ours?

There are millions of Bangladeshis (including many living abroad) who are doing precisely that: sponsoring a child, pooling resources to build schools and clinics, donating books to libraries, buying textbooks for orphans, creating scholarships for poor but meritorious students. The means of charity are endless, tangible and intangible. What counts is that we make the extra effort to do the best we can, to lift a burden here and bring a smile there, to forgive a debt, to give hope to a beaten spirit, to ... fill in the space and just do it. No charity is too small and no giving from the heart ever leads to poverty.

The tragedy is that millions of

us are also self-absorbed narcissists who have no margin in our lives for others, who remain adamantly blind to the inequity around. But it is never too late to change.

In a visit to Bangladesh last December, Bill Gates described his meeting with seamstresses and other women entrepreneurs in a village as "a religious experience." He was particularly impressed by how micro-credit, pioneered by Grameen Bank and promoted by Brac and other organisations around the world, is transforming the lives of women. This first-hand observation undoubtedly played a pivotal role in his recent resolve to make micro-credit a salient feature of his foundation.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of the new era of philanthropy we are now witnessing will be to curb various kinds of extremism. When people are freed from the ancient curses of ill health, poverty, ignorance, and debt, and their children survive to lead productive lives, the world will become a better place for all.

Currently, Bangladesh seems to be in the grip of a particularly venal form of religious extremism in which a minority of zealots are persecuting Ahmadis. To these zealots we say: It is up to God, and God alone, to decide who is a Muslim and who is not. You commit the gravest of sins if you attempt to usurp the right that is uniquely God's. Back off! Use your energy to do good to your fellow humans. Do it out of the charity of your heart, even if you cannot do it in the name of God.

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A truly representative UN

WU MIAOFA, China Daily

ALTHOUGH Kofi Annan's second term as United Nations (UN) secretary-general does not expire until December 2006, the campaign to replace him is shifting into high gear. The Security Council will start discussing candidates for the job in July, with bidding for the world's most prominent diplomatic job then expected to take centre stage.

The new secretary-general is supposed to be first nominated by the Security Council, which means that he or she must get the support of nine votes of the 15 members, including the five veto-holding permanent members, before the appointment is confirmed by the UN General Assembly.

The campaign for UN secretary-general presently focuses on two questions. From which region should the candidate come? And will the short-listed candidates be acceptable to UN members, notably the five permanent members of the Security Council China, France, the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States?

John Bolton, US ambassador to the United Nations, said in February that the continent the next secretary-general comes from should not matter. According to Bolton, what matters most is whether the next secretary-general is a competent diplomat. His remarks were soon echoed by British UN Ambassador Emyr Parry and many influential voices in the Western media. Reading between the lines, Bolton's statement rejects the understanding that a diplomat from Asia should be elected to the post of the UN secretary-general.

Thirty-four years have passed since an Asian, U Thant of Myanmar, stepped down from the post of the UN secretary-general. The long interval has seen six people from Europe, Latin America and Africa holding the secretary-general's post.

Both common sense and principle require that a competent Asian diplomat be elected to the UN top post. This accords with the rule that the post be held by people from different regions in rotation, as well as tallying with the common ground shared by many UN members.

China and Russia, two of the five Security Council permanent members, have made their stance clear an Asian be chosen for the job. The US argument that "diplomatic competence" comes first and foremost merely veils the true intention of Washington and its allies their desire to handpick the next UN chief.

True, the UN's top position should be occupied by a diplomat of seniority and competence. But how should this "competence" be defined? In the view of this author, Bolton's definition of "competence" simply means whoever would be prepared to dance to Washington's tune. Otherwise, he or she would be simply written off as a "mediocrity."

For instance, Tanzanian diplomat Salim Ahmed Salim, who was recommended by the Organisation of African Unity for the post of UN secretary-general, was repeatedly blocked by the United States in 1981. Former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, when seeking his second term in the mid-1990s, had to quit the race because Washington showed him the red card. Both Salim and Boutros-Ghali were gifted diplomats. However, their political values did not tally with the US worldview. So they were out.

There are now five possible candidates from Asia: Thai Deputy-Prime Minister Surakit Sathirathai, South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, Sri Lankan presidential adviser Jayantha Dhanapala, Kemal Dervis, a Turk who is currently holding the portfolio of UN Development Programme and Shashi Tharoor, an Indian who is the UN deputy secretary-general overseeing media affairs.

Two Europeans are also in the race Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Latvia's

president, and Alexander Kwasniewski, former Polish president.

Behind the five Asian aspirants are Asia's huge population and its massive economic clout. Patient discussions and negotiations are required to eventually choose the best candidate. At this very stage, it is too early to predict who will be the next secretary-general.

The contest to succeed Annan greatly concerns developing nations because the person at the UN helm is expected to play a vitally important part in charting the future course of the United Nations. The developing nations also hope that the new secretary-general will help uphold the UN Charter's basic principles and that he or she would fairly and properly handle a host of problems involving racial conflicts, communal strife, religious disputes and territorial clashes.

They also expect that the United Nations to take substantial and effective measures to address the problem of the North-South polarisation and expect the reform of the United Nations to be promoted in a steady and reasonable way. The new secretary-general will play a major role in both tasks.

The United States has its own calculations. In general, it hopes that the new secretary-general's political values, policy orientations and way of working will be to Washington's taste. It also hopes that the new secretary-general will back Washington's foreign policy on important security issues and that the United Nations, therefore, will roughly remain in the fold.

With regard to upholding the principles of the United Nations Charter, the United States wants to replace the quaintness and conventions of the UN Charter with "human rights coming before sovereignty," "humanitarian interference" and "pre-emption." It follows, therefore, that the desired new secretary-general will assist Washington in this regard.

On the issue of development, the United States and others provide developing countries with aid and reduce their debts conditionally, using "human rights," "democracy" and "good governance" as leverage. But they stay free from the commitments required by the United Nations Millennium Summit's goals. The desired new secretary-general should, therefore, not pressurize Washington on these matters.

In terms of UN reform, the US administration is reluctant to see these reforms started, including expanding the size of the Security Council. So the best secretary-general should also be lukewarm about the reforms.

Under such circumstances, it will be impossible to finally decide on a new UN secretary-general, one that is to the liking of all interested parties.

The situation, therefore, requires both sides to compromise to a certain extent. It is quite possible that a new UN secretary-general can be found who takes care of the interests of the developing world as well as those of the big powers.

It is advisable that a leading diplomat from a small or medium-sized country should be the next UN secretary-general, as experience over the last six decades shows.

This is because, to begin with, the new secretary-general would be universally representative, taking into consideration that the vast majority of UN members are small- and medium-sized countries.

Second, a secretary-general from a small- or medium-sized country would help bring UN members closer together and, in turn, promote UN unity. Third, a UN secretary-general from a small- or medium-sized country would be more capable of facilitating exchanges between these nations as well as winning backing from big countries.

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For two years now, Bill Gates has been wrestling with a dilemma. As his foundation, funded by \$29 billion of his donations, became increasingly influential in fields like global health and education, it became clear that if he spent more time there, it could have a huge impact on the world. But he loved his work as chief brain of Microsoft, the company he cofounded in 1975. Recently, he made the decision: beginning in July 2008, he will assume full-time duties at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He will keep his post as Microsoft's chairman, but spend only 20 percent of his time there. His duties will fall to chief technical officers Ray Ozzie (who becomes the new chief software architect) and Craig Mundie, who will oversee the company's research efforts. CEO Steve Ballmer will continue to run the company, but without the full-time counsel of his best friend and the icon who is synonymous with the world's biggest software company. Steven Levy of Newsweek spoke to an energized Gates, in his Redmond, Washington office right after he broke the news.

Steven Levy: Why was it necessary to make this shift?

Bill Gates: I wouldn't say it's necessary. It's a personal choice I made. Clearly if I didn't have the foundation I would be staying here full time and working super, super hard because I love working on software. But I was feeling an increased desire to spend more time on foundation work. It was always clear that that day would come at some point. It's actually pretty rare for somebody to have two things to do that they love and feel like they're important and challenging.

Is this ironclad? What if the situation at Microsoft is different in 2008?

Once I make a decision, I'm pretty good about not thinking twice. We walked out of the green room yesterday (before the press conference to make the announcement) and I said, "Wait a minute, I don't think I'll do this." They knew I was joking. (Anyway) the truth is not that much happens in two years. I think Microsoft's going to do great.

What will you do at the foundation when you're full time?

I am going to study health and education a lot. Education is this mysterious thing. For the US to continue its strength I think it's almost necessary for our education system to be a lot better. So I want to learn all that. I want to sit in classrooms, read books, look at people who think they have technology solutions.

You'd sit in the back of a school room somewhere?

Yeah. I don't have it all laid out. I don't want to plan what my life is going to be like two years from now because I'm still very much in the full-time mode (at Microsoft). I know you're concerned about global warming. Will the foundation become involved with that? I'm already reading some books on energy and the environment, but I will read a lot more two years from now and think whether there's something the foundation should do in those areas. The angle I'll have when I'll look at most things is, What about the 4 billion poorest people? What about energy and environmental issues for them?

Not being at Microsoft full time, would you be more free to engage

in political activities?

I'd have more time, but I'm not going to. I'm never going to run for office, ever. That wouldn't be the way for me to either enjoy myself or have the best impact that fits what I do and the way I work. Does this switch mark the end of an era?

No. We're just at the beginning of the software-driven era; we're not anywhere near the full completion of the dream that Paul Allen and I had about a software-centric industry that changes the world. You feel that people overemphasize your role at Microsoft? Oh, absolutely.

But you fill a unique role as an ambassador of Microsoft.

Yes, I do. But say I give a product forecast for Office. If I'd never given the speech would you change the forecast for Office? No one will ever have the visibility that I had as the founder of this company. It's just won't happen and it's not necessary. Other than perhaps Steve Jobs, I've had (the most) visibility, but it doesn't let the world understand how many incredible people it takes. So I think Microsoft will be fine in terms of getting its message out.

Would you want your children to take key roles at Microsoft?

No. I think -- and it's just a personal opinion -- when you get an enterprise of this scale that you actually want to discourage your kids about getting involved in it because you'd get confusion about whether they had some special status or not.

Emotionally, what will be the toughest part of not being here full time?

I'm going to miss being at the center of activity and making these hard decisions. There's a part of me that goes, "Wow, do you really understand how much you're going to miss that?" There will be days when I'm sitting (at the foundation and) going, "Gosh, those guys are sitting over there making cool decisions and I'm not." But there will (also) be days I'm grokking education or health care and I'll go, "Wow, this is what I enabled myself to do, and the foundation is going to be smarter and do better things because of this."

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