



Rays of hope

Too often, and for too long, we have accustomed ourselves to believing that nothing much is happening in Bangladesh. Whatever positive things that happen we tend to ignore taking to heart all the negative developments. To break away from that mind-set we decided to investigate, especially in our private sector, things that our entrepreneurs were able to accomplish in spite of the obstacles faced by them. In the following reports we find a clear indication of our ability to move forward and develop "in spite of..." And we promise that we will.

— Editor

A tribute to farmers

by Reaz Ahmad

HATS OFF TO our farmers for whom Bangladesh reaped successive bumper crops both in 1998-99 and 1999-2000. It is for their laborious job that our granaries are full today. Farmers' hard work brought us to a situation where country is well poised to take up the challenges of food security.

After experiencing the worst deluge of the last century in 1998, Bangladesh turned around belying world concern that people would die from hunger. Paddy grew in plenty right after the flood. It came as a blessing that recouped the huge losses the flood had inflicted upon the economy.

When we are eulogising our peasants for their marvellous attainment in agriculture, we better not forget the policy support that the government did provide to the resource-poor farmers.

It was indeed a happy marriage between farmers' efforts and pragmatic policy supports extended by the government. Above all, thanks to the gracious nature that rain and sunshine came in perfect order helping farmers to reap the very deserving harvest.

When other key indicators of the economy showed a bleak prospect, agriculture sector once again demonstrated the high potentials it holds for building a prosperous Bangladesh.

Agriculture posted six per cent growth in 1997-98 fiscal when the subsequent flooding washed away a substantial amount of the major crop - aman.

After the flood that kept two-thirds of Bangladesh under water for over two months, a five per cent growth rate in the agro-sector in 1998-99 came as an undeniable proof that even little steps in the form of policy support can make a big difference.

In its latest publication, *Rice - Hunger or Hope*, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) gives credence to the fact that political wisdom helped avert famine after the 1998 deluge.

Flood, droughts, politics, and resettlement of 10 million civil war refugees ignited the great famine of 1974, which caused massive human misery and starvation. The flood of 1998 was equally destructive. But no famine followed the flood of 1998, thanks to politi-

cal will and increased rice production," says the IRRI report.

Flood gulped two million metric tonnes (MT) of standing paddy worth 630 million US dollars. Added to an annual food deficit of another two million MT, the shortfall stood at four million MT forcing the government to import rice from abroad right after the flood. Government had to borrow 338 million US dollars from IMF and IDA for emergency food import straining the foreign exchange reserve.

Since that time agricultural production got new momentum. Farmers gifted the nation with crop bumpers in last boro, aman and also in wheat. It was a very prudent government decision to take up a vigorous post-flood agricultural rehabilitation programme.

In early 1990s there was an average yearly agro-loan availability to the tune of Taka 600 crore. It surged to an average Taka 1500 crore in mid-1990s. After the worst deluge of the century in 1998, government went for a massive loan giving drive.

Over Taka 3,000 crore were made available for farmers to get as farm credit. This is for the first time that sharecroppers got collateral-free loan. Loan repayment was encouraging as well. The agriculture minister herself had bid farewell to the culture of 'political loan waiver'. Because it was time-tested that unlike white-collar bank loan defaulters, poor farmers of the country never wanted to become wilful defaulters.

Immediately after the recession of floodwaters, the government acted promptly in providing seeds and other agricultural inputs among the farmers, who by turn sowed late varieties in pursuit of recouping the crop damages.

In achieving agricultural growth in any given society, input management and marketing is a key factor. This is one of the areas where the government scored good success by drastically improving the fertiliser and seed marketing system. A buffer stock of seed was built up.

Command areas were delimited for dealers to market fertiliser in a competitive but healthy atmosphere. In past greed-driven dealers having political allegiance used to divert fertilisers from one part of the country to other and create

man-made crisis.

Now the government is also providing subsidy in terms of price support to urea so that resource-poor farmers can afford application of chemical fertiliser to enhance soil fertility.

Crop production marked negative growth rate in subsequent years in 1993-94 and 1994-95 largely because of gross mismanagement in fertiliser marketing and political disturbances. But later on food-grain production crossed the 20 million MT mark first time in history in 1996-97. In the early 1980s production was hardly 15 million MT.

Yearend food stock in government silos was well below one million MT in 1996-97 and 1997-98 while it touched the million MT mark in 1998-99. Now that we are endowed with good yields in boro, aman and wheat, the public sector food re-

agro-business.

Budgetary allocation, both revenue and development, for Agriculture Ministry now stands at around Tk. 1000 crore. Private sector has started investing into seed business, agro-machinery and agro-based industry development.

Success in agriculture is essential for the macro-economic stability. Failure in food-grain production leads to inflation and rising pressure on foreign exchange reserve. Agriculture is also directly responsible for the creation of 63.2 percent of total jobs in the country. It is the single largest employer of nation's workforce. It contributes 32.4 percent of total GDP.

Agriculture contributes 13 per cent of total export earning. If agro-based industrial products are included than the contribution shoot up to 27 per cent.

back, the volume has reduced to a mere four to five million tonnes now.

Unless people are trained for generating more income, poor have to reduce their food intake, which is below 1800 kilocalorie per person a day. They also have to reduce expenses on education, sell out their last remaining assets and even sell their labour in advance. Sometimes they are forced to lend money from informal sources with high interest rate.

So access to nutritious food by the ultra poor should be one of the foremost priority for Bangladesh if it wants a healthy future generation to grow up.

But at the same time growing more food to feed the increased population would remain the big challenge. Though the birth rate is controlled to a great extent, because of large popula-

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serve position has hit all time record. Presently, there is a stock of over one and a half million MT of food in the granaries.

According to government policy guidelines, the main objectives of food management system are two folds. First, it aims at providing food security in the country. Second, it attempts to ensure fair price to the growers through increased domestic procurement.

In 1994-95, only 2.77 lakh MT was procured from domestic markets. This volume has now reached some six lakh MT in any given year. As a result, double benefits are gained - saving precious foreign currency and paying fair prices to the growers.

As we take pride in tremendous success in agriculture and more attention from public sector, time has come for private sector also to take interest in

It is evident from what we have demonstrated in collective efforts that despite all odds in socio-political arena successes can still come in our way. Prudent policy decisions, better understanding between GO-NGO sectors and initiatives of the private sector can give the dividend that we long aspired. Of course, farming is the largest private sector in the country.

To assist this private sector, the present government enacted an Agriculture Extension Policy and modified Seed Rules. To facilitate better linkage between research and extension, legal reforms were brought in eight agricultural institutions.

One third of Bangladesh's tillable land now comes under irrigation. The coverage was hardly one sixth of total land a decade back. Thanks to farmers' initiative and rapid expansion of small-scale irrigation throughout the country, particularly the rice-rich northern belt.

Rice, the staple, apart Bangladesh also posted growth in wheat and maize cultivation. Hardly one decade back we had a wheat production of one million MT per annum. Now the production rises to two million MT.

The maize area has also increased from a mere 3,600 hectares in 1991-92 to 15,000 hectares now. At present local maize production is 80,000 MT while the potential demand is calculated to be around 2,70,000 MT.

Some 26,000 dairies and 73,000 poultry throughout the country well supplemented overall growth of agro-sector.

Future challenges and prospect

If enough pro-agricultural activities are not taken up immediately and agro-based industries are not developed in rural Bangladesh, there would be additional pressures on inadequate civic amenities due to influx of unemployed farm labourers to urban areas.

Country's population would stand at 173 million by the year 2020. Bangladesh will need to produce an additional eight and a half million MT of rice by 2020. Of the total population, 46 per cent would be living in urban neighbourhoods. Policy planners will obviously have to keep in mind the changing food habits of urban population.

It would be a very tough job for Bangladesh to grow enough food to feed its ever-growing population against the backdrop of diminishing farmland and gradual fall in soil fertility. Bangladesh would ill-afford fat import bill if it has to procure food from shrinking world rice market. Rice is one of the least traded food items in the globe.

With dramatic change in global food aid portfolio, Bangladesh needs to utilise all its food-aided programmes for sustainable development of 30 million ultra poor in the country.

According to WFP estimates, against an average availability of 15 million tonnes of food aid in the world less than a decade

tion base that we have already growth in population often tend to outpace the rate of growth in agriculture.

High yielding variety development, pursuing frontier research, better land management, input and water use efficiency and biotechnological advancements hold the prospect for production increase in future.

Experts are of the opinion that Bangladesh agriculture has to graduate from the subsistence level to commercial level. This would be the ultimate reality in foreseeable future.

Family inheritance of the land ownership leads to fragmentation of cultivable land. Large farmlands are fast diminishing. Urbanisation and industrialisation are taking their tolls. Fragmented land pattern remains a barrier in applications of modern farm management, technologies and farm machinery.

Commercial farming and cooperative farming are seen as two options. As economy develops and society becomes more industrialised, people also tend to leave farming profession and develop other preferences. A hundred years back 98 per cent of US workforce had their jobs in farmland but now only two per cent do the job of farming.

This phenomenon is nothing unique to the USA. In all developing economies, there is a growing trend that people prefer non-farm jobs than on-farm jobs. If we want our farming professionals to continue their current jobs, a lot of incentives should be guaranteed.

Variety development and frontier research

Breeding high yielding varieties always holds prospect for higher production. After the 'Green Revolution' in mid-60s evolving of semi-dwarf-rice variety changed the whole growth scenario in rice-growing Asia.

Suiting the irrigated eco-system in Bangladesh, our rice researchers also developed some of the most productive varieties that helped doubling our agro-production within two decades time.

BRRI Dhan-29, the best among 38 varieties developed so far by the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), even outsmart some of the good hybrid rice varieties now marketed in the country.

BRRI has also developed country's first hybrid rice variety, which waits government approval for cultivation.

Credit goes to wheat breeders as well for gifting the country two late-sowing varieties - Sourav and Gourab - which would substantially contribute in growing more wheat in the country at a time when food donation in terms of wheat is shrinking.

Government has recently endorsed setting up of a National Biotechnology Institute. Though late, this pragmatic decision would help a lot in the long run if frontier researches are pursued in a proper environment.

But traditionally lesser



Climate congenial or not, their resilience has always paid off.

amount of money is being invested in research activities in Bangladesh. Unless more investment is pumped in, we can not expect any breakthrough from our scientists. So investment portfolio should be redefined and process of brain draining has to be stopped.

After 'Green Revolution' of 1960s, the world is looking forward for 'Gene Revolution' that holds prospect for new breakthrough in agriculture. If we have to catch up with 'Gene Revolution' in days to come, public sector investment for research purpose is a must.

As advanced economies are already applying gene technology in conquering the yield barrier, bio-piracy surfaced as a new threat to be taken care of. Bangladesh need preparation for preserving its plant varieties against the backdrop of debate on patenting life forms. Of late the government has en-

dorsed a bio-safety regulations, which was long overdue.

Public sector investment into research needs to be supplemented by investment from the private sector and NGO sector. In Bangladesh, private sector and NGOs had earlier showed interest in import and trading of seeds and agro-products but now at least some institutions are coming up with new thinking and investment in basic research work. That is a good sign and such investments have to be augmented manifold.

Eco-farming

There is no denial of the fact that the Green Revolution has changed the agricultural scenario over the last four decades. But realisation comes now that as we reaped the benefit, we did exploit the nature extensively. It took toll on environment.

The Green Revolution encountered problems of sustain-

ability. Critics rightly point it out that Green Revolution heavily relied on external inputs. These inputs - fertiliser and pesticides - have got diminishing rate of return.

Abu Taher Rahmani, a national award-winning farmer from Cox's Bazar, told *The Daily Star* that year-by-increase in doses of chemical fertilisers and pesticides for reaping more yield from the same land is actually a myth. He was speaking from two decades of farming experience.

"I have been using compost (natural manure) as fertiliser and urine of cows as pests killers for years now. I am no worse than any chemical fertiliser users," claimed Rahmani.

But reality is that pressure on cropland will force the country to go for expansion of irrigation, further replacement of

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