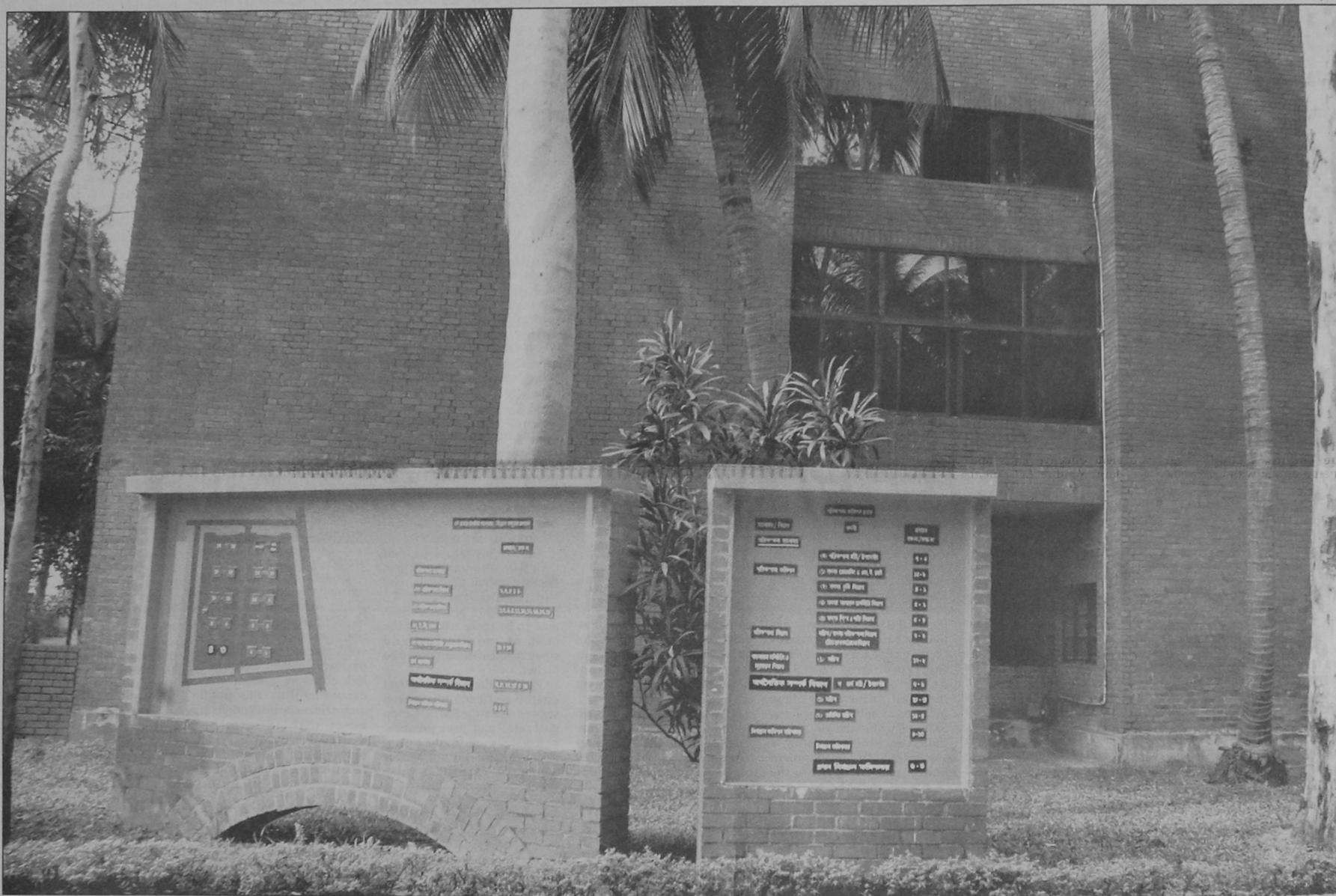


Divergent *statistics* unhelpful to planning



In Bangladesh, we have formidable difficulties in arriving at an agreed figure in areas like production and consumption of food, adult literacy, magnitude of poverty, volume of informal trade and transactions, damage due to natural disaster, domestic violence and so on. We would be shocked at the blatant divergence in the estimate of food production and the import need as presented by the agriculture ministry, food ministry and the bureau of statistics.

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THE political masters throw a fit at disagreeable statistics. They suspect the motive, decry the methodology, and pretend to brush aside the findings if they go against them. At times, they would suggest dismantling of the organisation that crunched out data that did not support their official or public claims. The same politicians would profusely quote the statistics released by the same organisation if those suited their purpose. They are not interested in the academic rigour of the methodology, or the actual process of collecting data. They may not have the time, energy or skill to assess the validity of the data. Had they gone for such analysis or exercise, they might have discovered that their inferences were right, unfortunately for a wrong reason.

Statistics released by different organisations on a particular subject do not often tally. It is sometimes baffling to see the yawning differences between figures quoted by two agencies working in the related field. The differences have far reaching implications for the nation, and for the life of citizens as a whole. Production figures of one agency may indicate that the country has a food surplus;

it should, therefore, be a food exporting country. Figures released by another agency may show that the country has a net deficit in food; it should, therefore, import food to avert any catastrophe. Policy makers are in a fix to ascertain the real situation obtaining in the country. Instead of working out an informed decision, they use rule of thumb to opt for a decision that is less risky from a political point of view. If pundits come up with such varying statistics, political leaders can rationalise their opting for the one that suits them best.

Common people and academics are likely to be curious to know the sources of discrepancies in the statistics. They are equally interested in finding a way to reconcile the differences and churn out some agreed numbers for use by the requiring agencies. The sources of discrepancies reside in the concept, methodology and predisposition of researchers, data collectors and the controlling authorities of the statistical organisations. The multiple nodal points of man and mind make it extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact location of discrepancies. A scientific search procedure, however, may lead us to the proximate area, if not the precise one, of discrepancies. We

cannot always eliminate the discrepancies totally, but we may bring them to an acceptable level of confidence.

In Bangladesh, we have formidable difficulties in arriving at an agreed figure in areas like production and consumption of food, adult literacy, magnitude of poverty, volume of informal trade and transactions, damage due to natural disaster, domestic violence and so on. We would be shocked at the blatant divergence in the estimate of food production and the import need as presented by the agriculture ministry, food ministry and the bureau of statistics. If we go by the agricultural ministry's figures we find the country to be at least self sufficient in food. The food ministry's figures will highlight the need for import to meet the country's food deficit. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) usually releases the figures at a later stage. They are supposed to be more reliable, but they do not tally with figures released by other agencies. One point is common: they are all based on sample surveys; they are estimates, and they have been arrived at through a mixture of actual measurement and eye estimation. And then, of course, the adjustments engendered to support the

predisposition.

Aggregate consumption depends on the size of the population and per capita consumption of food. A part of the produce goes to meet the need for seed, feed, and wastage (SFW); usually this is taken to be 10% of production. The assumed per capita consumption is reasonable, 17.2 ounces per day now. Interestingly, a normalisation exercise is not done to adjust for 10 million children below 3 years who do not consume cereal directly. Normalisation would have brought down the food requirement. Despite this, we have food deficit in real life. Some error must have crept in the calculus, though it is not clearly discernible. Five possibilities may be underscored: (i) production has been over estimated, (ii) consumption has been underestimated (iii) there has been build up of huge buffer stock both at producer's and trader's level, (iv) industrial and other uses of cereal crops have greatly increased in the recent past, and (v) SFW will be higher, say about 15%. The upshot of discussion is that we do not have any reliable statistics about the food gap in the country; we are still groping in the dark.

The situation is worse in case of adult literacy. Different

figures are presented in various government documents, let alone the documents of the private agencies. The same donor agency comes up with discordant figures in its documents. The range of variations is inordinately wide: the highest figure is 64% and the lowest is 41%. It appears that there has been no improvement in literacy since 2001, the achievement is negative as presented in different documents. The figures quoted by the president on the floor of the national assembly are, in effect, contradicted by other functionaries of the government when they quote widely divergent figures in their presentations: what an embarrassment for the government. Statistics furnished by one delegation in an international conference are not supported by another delegation in some other conference, thus making the country's document apocryphal to the international community. This position is unacceptable.

The author can cite myriad examples where government documents are replete with divergent statistics on a particular subject. The discrepancy between figures released by the government and those released by private sources is well understood. It is, however, difficult to explain convinc-

ingly the wide divergence in the numbers quoted in various government documents. It only reflects the utter lack of coordination amongst different agencies dealing with statistics on a particular subject. The country needs to have an apex coordinating agency for statistical activities carried out in the government sector. The agency has to be properly built up to match the responsibility. That means it has to have the necessary authority and stature to coordinate and reconcile the differences whenever and wherever such reconciliation is deemed necessary. It has to be guided by a competent board with sole authority to release official statistics on behalf of the government. The board can formally authorise any agency to release statistics on a particular subject if that agency is deemed competent to carry out the job independently.

The composition of the board has to be such that it can stand up to pressures, both from internal and external sources, and maintain the integrity of the process and product of the system constructed by them. Expert committees should be set up to guide the process of collecting and compiling data. Intensive and extensive deliberations on the preliminary reports have to

be organised before the data are finally ready for release. All government organisations have to use statistics released by this apex body or agencies formally authorised by it. They will be debarred from using data released by other organisations. The private sector may collect and use their own data. Government organisations may compare the apex body's data with those of the private sector, but they cannot use private sector data for official purposes.

Statistics are not meant to be precisely correct. They are correct within a level of confidence. The limitations of information are usually set forth in statistical reports. Some statistics gain currency in the brouhaha triggered by popular zeitgeist. We have to live with them, though we have to be very discreet in using them for realistic planning. Only properly screened and reliable data can show us the way to the right solution.

This article was first published in our January 03, 2008 issue.

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