

Massive investment in agriculture: An answer

Investment in the agriculture sector to attain a sustainable economy in the country is the only answer to avoid any catastrophe in food autarky in the country. This should be taken into consideration during the finalisation of the budget of the 2008-2009 financial years.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

SUSTAINABLE economy to ensure long-term food security cannot be achieved without making substantial investment in agriculture to contribute towards increasing gross domestic products.

A country depending on higher import bill cannot claim to be risk free on the strength of its growth of remittance or foreign exchange reserve, whatever it might be. For Bangladesh, there is no scope to be complacent with the record high reserve of foreign exchange of \$ 610 crore and 37 lakh as on March 6. Equally, it does not make any sense to be too happy to see the foreign remittance of \$ 71 crore and 50 lakh in the month of January.

Besides, the gradual growth in our foreign exchange earning from export of knitwear and woven garments, along with the export of some non-traditional items like vegetables, flowers and foliage, agro-processed foods, footwear, and pharmaceuticals, has given an impression of a stable and bright economy.

No doubt, these are indications of economic strength, but not the answer for a sustainable economy in a country like ours where domestic demand increases rapidly with increased growth of population.

To ensure macro-economic stability, agriculture must be pri-

oritised in comparison to other service sectors. Agriculture, comprising of crops and non-crops like forests, fisheries and livestock, accounts for 19.49% of GDP and employs over 63% of the skilled and unskilled workforce in our country.

Bangladesh, no doubt, is endowed with fertile soil, appropriate ecological diversity and abundant ground-water resources. This is a unique country having opportunities of generating farm and non-farm activities with minimum efforts and investments.

Unfortunately, the potential of the agriculture sector has not been exploited adequately in spite of comparative advantages in the production of high-value crops, fruits and flowers. Substantial initiatives have not been taken to explore the avenues of increased production of different varieties of agro-products, in spite of the commitments outlined in the National Agriculture Policy and the commissions constituted thereafter. In fact, it is difficult to gain remarkable successes or make visible break-throughs unless big entrepreneurs come forward with major investment in the agro-based and processing industries.

Most economists strongly feel that the widespread poverty, growing inequality, rapid population growth and rising unemployment, find their origins in the stagnation and often retrogression of eco-

nomie life in rural areas where agriculture is the mainstay. The reasons for such deterioration are:

- Drastic reduction in public investment in agriculture.

- Lack of adequate external resources for investment in agriculture.
- Highly subsidised agriculture in developed countries.
- Dumping of agricultural products by developed countries.
- Sense of complacency of green revolution activities.

Apart from the above, the agriculture sector in Bangladesh has some inherent constraints that contain its growth and maintain a gradual decline in its contributions to GDP.



Some of these are as follows:

- Dependence on nature, but having no long-term scientific ways to combat the vagaries of the same.
- Rapid decrease in the availability of cultivable land due to construction of houses on fertile agricultural land or on the ponds, canals or rivers. Unfortunately, there is no rule in rural areas regarding the house building.
- Widespread poverty among the marginal farmers engaged in agriculture, and most of them are deeply indebted with the micro-credit or agricultural loan from the banks.
- Lack of required capital for agricultural activities with modern implements and innovative methods derived from Rand D.
- Uncertainty of fair prices of agricultural commodities due to underdeveloped marketing system and packaging procedures for export, especially for horticulture and fruits and foliage.
- Inadequate, or absence of, cold storage or cold chain system to maintain market prices stable round the year.
- Availability of high yielding variety of seeds and preservation of the same to increase the farm products.

These constraints must be overcome with massive investment in the agriculture sector and devising of pragmatic approaches to increase the production, failing which we shall have to pay an abnormal price for import, as we see even now.

The import of rice during the current fiscal year already stands at 29.95 lakh metric tons, and this

might reach 40 lakh tons by June. Surprisingly enough, the price of rice from India might be claimed to be \$ 650 per metric ton, but each ton is being sold at \$ 330 in the district of Burdwan in West Bengal. If the imported price reaches such a level, the local market price could be more than Tk 45.00 per kilogram.

In such a situation, with possibilities of more acute problems, the only answer is to increase local production through more investment with private-public partnership. There should be a package of incentives, financial and technical, to invite investment in agriculture. A few of them are as follows:

- Technology transfer through intensive training or development of human resources. For this purpose, Bari, Irri, Bina, Cerdi and other agricultural colleges and universities may take concerted efforts under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture.
- Set up more modern research outfits with tissue culture facilities in addition to the facilities now available at Bari, or strengthening the existing facilities.
- Review the Seed Policy and allow the import of seeds of high-value crops, and distribution of the same to the marginal farmers.
- Establishment of the EPZ for agro-processing industries. The EPZ for agriculture products established at Ishwardi, should be made functional with all available facilities.
- The rate of interest for bank loan for investment in agriculture should be reduced, and the spread should not be more than 3% without service charges.



- The subsidy for fertiliser and seed should be increased reasonably.
- The Equity and Entrepreneurship Fund of Bangladesh Bank should create more opportunities for investment in agriculture.
- Duty rebate and cash incentive facilities for the export of agriculture and horticulture products should be more pragmatic.
- Investment for diversification and growth of high-value crop will be rewarding. There is enough scope for production of mushroom, broccoli, baby corn, French bean, capsicum, orchid and other ornamental plants. Due to the possibilities of export of these crops, investors in the private sector will feel it attractive.
- There exists ample scope to derive edible oil from rice bran at Natore, Chapai Nawabgonj and Dinajpur. A large number of medium-size rice bran oil processing mills could be established at Rajshahi division. Besides, there is enough oppor-

tunity to export fine and aromatic rice like Kataribhog, Kalizira Chingura etc. the production of which could increase with incentives.

Wheat price round the world is increasing fast, and it might increase more due to crop failure and infestation in Canada and some European countries.

Potato is the third staple food, next to rice and wheat. Bangladesh can produce 45 lakh MT in a year. Establishment of potato-based agro processing industries for french fries, potato chips, potato flakes with high yielding seeds can earn crores in foreign exchange.

Thus, investment in the agriculture sector to attain a sustainable economy in the country is the only answer to avoid any catastrophe in food autarky in the country. This should be taken into consideration during the finalisation of the budget of the 2008-2009 financial years.

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Participatory democracy

Let us indeed open our minds and work together to come up with new and better ideas to govern our lives, and challenge the age-old accepted practices, for it is through change that we can move from the current stagnation of blame and counter-blame to a new horizon based on competition based on cooperation, the final beneficiaries of which would be the whole nation.

CHOWDHURY ABD-ALLAH QUAISED

It is a fundamental right of a citizen that he can express ideas on how to improve the way his country is managed, even if that may be a novel idea not supported by the constitution. Thus, I venture to share my thoughts on an alternative kind of democracy, which I feel could solve many of the problems that are plaguing our total political system.

The idea which I propose is that of a "participative government," by which I am trying to describe a possibility where -- believe it or not -- a government can be formed by incorporating the opposition into itself. Basically, a government of this kind could be formed by distributing the ministries between the parties in proportion to the votes or seats obtained by each party, and allowing the prime minister's position to be assumed

by the leader of the party with the highest number of seats.

The leader of the party with the 2nd highest number of seats could be a deputy prime minister in recognition of the fact that he/she had enough skills to have governed the nation previously, or may do so in future. The ministers from the non-majority party/parties could be chosen simply from an impartial judgment of their talent and past performances.

In describing how the system would work and benefit the nation, I would like to say that naturally when the losing party will no longer be described as "the opposition" but perhaps as simply the "non-majority," not even "minority," the desire to only oppose will not arise. The elections will no longer be a life and death struggle for power of a whole group and subsequent deprivation of the other, but a decision about who would lead the team and who

would be the majority.

The very clear gains of giving away perhaps one-third of the ministries to the so-called opposition would be that they would have the mental satisfaction of not being excluded from decision making entirely, and they would be sharing power and all the advantages derived from there, thus reducing their feeling of deprivation and defeat. When these negative sentiments are reduced, naturally, the desire for committing destructive activities, or actions that may be detrimental to the nation, would immediately be reduced.

Having contemplated this idea for over a decade, I, as a common citizen with no political bias, nor any lofty degrees in political science or economics, feel that if we are going to label a group as "the opposition," then what else are we to expect from them except opposition? But if we were to incorporate the party into government, it would

definitely reduce chaos, because they would work in the role that they get assigned to and try and contribute so much that in recognition of their efforts they could get elected to the principal government position the next time. So, the competition to outperform each other would be constructive.

Some may claim that there would be chaos in each and every decision making because the opposition, or rather the "non-majority," would try and sabotage the progress of the government from the inside. But I differ, because I feel the opposition would damage themselves too in the process, as any failure of the government would be considered their failure too. And the way for them to really succeed in winning appreciation would be to show greatest progress in the ministries that they would control.

The majority party, or the government, would not hinder the non-majority, as failure in any ministry, even if it was under a different party member, would lead to overall lapse in credibility of the majority holders too. Any side trying to harm the other would only display lack of tolerance, and inability to perform in a team.

If questions arise as to how each

party shall promote itself during elections -- the solution would be that the non-majority party would try and point out which decisions of the government went wrong and how those may have happened. The majority party may try downplaying the non-majority by pointing out the lapses in the ministries due to neglect, and also trying to blame overall government mistakes on the non majority for not preventing them from making those mistakes. That, in itself, would induce whoever would be the non-majority to always try and give constructive ideas.

Indeed, this would be best for the people as well, as we ought to understand that all parties in a parliament have talented leaders, and that even if any party or coalition wins 60% majority, there remain 40% of the voters and many non-voters who did not want them. Surely, that is a huge part of the population, and their interest needs to be reflected in the government and not just in the parliament. Indeed, just because their votes were for the losing party their preference cannot be fully discarded, demoralising a huge segment of the nation too.

Some politicians may refuse to work with people who uphold a

different philosophy, while some may selfishly feel that sharing cabinets with the opposition may take the charm out of dominating and ruling and the thrill of victory, but everyone needs to understand that it also creates an opportunity for each party to enjoy significantly higher power and importance even if the party does not become winner in the electoral race. There will no longer be a 5 to 10 year long wait to get to power, but simply advancing one's position within the category that is endowed with power.

A certain degree of competition and negative diplomacies can never be avoided, but, undoubtedly, this new system would significantly reduce all the clashes, turmoil, and political assassinations that happen so rampantly these days. It is certainly an idea deserving of thought, and one that may get fully realised only when young fresh blood enters politics.

Let us look at successful organisations, particularly business enterprises. There could be different sets of opinions among the senior management as well as among the board members, but they still belong to the same "senior management panel" or "board of directors," and they debate between themselves and get the

work done as a team, with ideas that are mostly a weighted average of all the differing opinions. It is never the case that one group of the management team or board takes all the decisions and dominates over another group, with the former calling themselves as the ones having controlling authority and the latter as an "opposition."

The idea of having an opposition in parliament was conceived in order to ensure that those governing would take into consideration of the opinions of everyone. However, if that ultimate goal can be better served through the method proposed here, then I see no reason why this method cannot be adopted.

In addition to all this there could be revolutionary new innovations, such as having scorecards for all members of parliament every 1.5 years approximately. Only the first 2 months, and the last 4 months can remain unevaluated. So, in a 5-year term, there would be 3 such evaluations, with the last one finishing up just about 4 months before the expiry of the term.

Based on cumulative scores obtained on these scorecards, parties could decide on whether or not to allow the individual to compete for the next term. The details

of such an evaluation mechanism can be expounded upon at a later time, but the essential fact is that being a parliamentarian would cease to be a game as it is for many, and it would take the shape of a seriously accountable and responsible job. There could be a lot of other add-ons to the system, all of which can be explored later on.

There could indeed be critics who may try to downplay this idea by rightly pointing out that this has not been implemented in any country so far. Well, I would like to declare if all first time ideas were to be discarded because they had not been tried and tested by others before, then I don't think that the words innovation or invention would exist!

So, let us indeed open our minds and work together to come up with new and better ideas to govern our lives, and challenge the age-old accepted practices, for it is through change that we can move from the current stagnation of blame and counter-blame to a new horizon based on competition based on cooperation, the final beneficiaries of which would be the whole nation.

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Responsibility of diplomats in the host country

Diplomats must realise that their more than frequent press and media appearances and meetings with host government officials and politicians on issues of the country's internal affairs and politics give rise to beliefs and perceptions in the public mind that are incorrect, and could even adversely affect their bilateral relations with Bangladesh while in no way helping to improve our politics or governance. They should also realise that no other capital would allow such violation of the Vienna Convention.

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

Article 41 paragraph 1 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations states in unequivocal terms: "Without prejudice to their privileges and immunities, it is the duty of all persons enjoying such privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving state. They also have a duty not to interfere in the internal affairs of that state." The paragraph does not lend itself to any confusion or conflict in interpretation, and it is respected in every world capital except Dhaka, unfortunately.

I spent 30 years as a diplomat, and I never saw this Article violated anywhere as it is in Bangladesh. Diplomats are privileged, and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations exempts them from legal action, taxation, and a host of other things in the host country, but

restricts them unequivocally, by the provisions of Article 41 paragraph 1, from interfering in the internal affairs of the host country.

The charge-de-affaires (CDA) of a country recently met with the AL and BNP top leadership to discuss the election roadmap under the full glare of the media. A number of ambassadors of western countries in Dhaka have been discussing about our internal affairs for quite some time now. During the BNP regime, people gathered a lot of information about inside developments in our politics from these ambassadors' regular media appearances. Their indulgence came to such a head that then foreign minister tried to resolve it because of the embarrassment it was causing the government. Unfortunately, Foreign Minister Morshed Khan went about this in an unprofessional manner, calling the ambassadors "trade unionists,"

and that too in the media, which further complicated the matter.

Instead of stopping, the ambassadors did the opposite, which encouraged the opponents of the BNP and a large section of the media who failed to see the diplomatic violations but not the embarrassment it was causing the BNP government. The emergence of a good number of private TV channels after 2001 encouraged these diplomats to talk openly and freely.

The role of a high commissioner is a case in point. In the last 4 years he has represented his country in Bangladesh, his "public" posture has been interesting. There is not one domestic issue upon which he has not cared to comment publicly, on our governance, elections, corruption etc.

Bangladesh's politics is far from perfect. We also depend a great deal upon economic aid from our development partners. This relationship

sometimes forces us to accept conditions on how we spend their assistance, as well as on issues of governance, because some countries such as the UK tie their assistance to good governance. Ambassadors use this aid issue to express their views on our internal affairs.

These actions of the ambassadors and their missions often also benefit us. However, when ambassadors use the media for conducting such actions where the government is criticised and embarrassed openly, the whole issue turns indecent and bizarre. It is not just that these actions conflict with the Article 43 Paragraph 1 and embarrass the government, they end up humiliating and embarrassing the people of the country.

In 2000, I watched the Egyptian election very closely, where President Mubarak won with over 90% votes, with the opposition almost totally gagged. I did not find any ambassador, US and the British included, giving any critical opinion on that election, other than perhaps in their secret dispatches to their governments or discreet meetings with Egyptian officials, or in very private conversation. We don't see any ambassadors of these countries criticising the govern-

ments in the glare of the media as they do in Bangladesh.

Constructive criticism from ambassadors of friendly countries is not, per se, a bad thing. But then, such criticism must be communicated in confidence. No country that has pride, the Vienna Convention notwithstanding, will accept ambassadors so freely criticising its politics or governance before the media as these diplomats do in our country. By these violations, we as a nation are being humiliated without achieving anything positive, because the problems remain where they are. In fact, without realising, these diplomats just complicate the problems further.

There is no doubt that these diplomats are also aware of the Vienna Convention. Why then do they violate this Convention? I was given an insight into this when I was recently discussing this issue with three senior editors. One of them said that it was our politicians who were to be blamed for the way diplomats behaved. When an opposition political party is unable to make the party in power listen to their fair demands, they find the latter receptive only when they get the diplomats from western missions on their side. Another editor

told me that the CDA of a country met with the AL and the BNP because of frantic calls from both the parties to meet her to get the US on their side for their current political agenda.

The Foreign Ministry must step in and tell the diplomats firmly that the Government of Bangladesh wants them to adhere strictly to article 41 of the Vienna Convention. Simultaneously, ministries/departments of the government must be careful about meeting ambassadors and high commissioners. I do not see any reason why the ACC chief or the CEC should be meeting with them, unless the latter have issues related to aid and assistance to discuss with them.

The media has a very important role to play here. Unfortunately, despite the fact that we have such a vibrant media, it lacks maturity in diplomatic reporting and has little knowledge of diplomatic nuances and practices. They seek out ambassadors and high commissioners like media personalities, and ask them questions that have no relevance at all to the task for which their countries have sent them here. The media should keep in mind that the diplomats cannot have any public opinion about our

internal affairs, and it is just not the right thing to ask them such questions. If they want to speak on our internal affairs, these reporters should remind them the relevant article of the Vienna Convention instead.

The political parties have a bigger role to play. They know more than anyone else that by discussing the country's internal affairs with foreign ambassadors and high commissioners, they are humiliating the country to take political advantage against their opponents, advantage that ultimately does not even materialise. It is not just that they are humiliating their own country; they are also humiliating themselves.

People outside Bangladesh will find it hard to believe that the top political leaders of Bangladesh's two major political parties have held meetings with the CDA of a particular country to discuss the country's election roadmap in the glare of the print and electronic media. The political parties must stop this immediately, for their own sake and for the sake of the country's pride. They can interact with these diplomats, but they should do so outside the glare of the media and be discreet about these interactions.

The diplomats who are violating the Vienna Convention have the ultimate responsibility of putting things in order here. Diplomats must realise that their more than frequent press and media appearances and meetings with host government officials and politicians on issues of the country's internal affairs and politics give rise to beliefs and perceptions in the public mind that are incorrect, and could even adversely affect their bilateral relations with Bangladesh while in no way helping to improve our politics or governance. They should also realise that no other capital would allow such violation of the Vienna Convention.

Diplomacy is an art that bears the best fruit when conducted with discretion and outside media glare. It can, as it is doing in Bangladesh, spoil good intent when conducted in the press and media. The bottom line, Vienna Convention and all the rest notwithstanding, is that diplomats in Bangladesh should keep their views about our internal affairs to themselves, and if their good intentions get the better of them they should convey these views discreetly to their hosts.

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