

## Health policy for achieving MDGs

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DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE United Nations General Assembly, after a long debate on April 1 and 2, 2008, reaffirmed that "Millennium Development Goals are achievable if we act now." It was also observed that "getting back on track" should be the appropriate strategy to attain the targets fixed almost eight years back. Out of the 8 goals of MDGs, three -- reduction of maternal mortality, improvement of maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases -- are directly related to health policy.

Three other goals -- eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education and promotion of gender equity and empowerment of women -- are very closely connected with the health service delivery system.

Besides, environmental sustainability and global partnership for development are also related to the implementation of health policy. In fact, health poverty is no less serious an issue than income poverty if we mean to build up sound human resource in the country.

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contribute toward creating good mothers, eventually leading to empowerment of women. A good health policy can speed up the progress of the nation, and make the people less vulnerable to disease and infirmity.

In consideration of the above, the health adviser has recently expressed his desire to formulate a new health policy incorporating emerging issues. Although appreciated by many, a quarter has expressed apprehension that the government might get involved in a debate, as happened in the case of the women development policy.

True, there are many stakeholders and vested groups involved in health infrastructure construction and maintenance, supply of food to hospitals, trading in and producing drugs and medicines, practicing as quacks and traditional healers, and running unauthorised clinics etc.

They might mobilise resistance to any move repugnant to their interest and limiting their share. We, therefore, support the revision of the health policy, and incorporation of issues like reproductive health, environmental health, adolescent health, and global health, and building of a capable human resource network to deliver quality health care and combat

future challenges.

It is true that the health sector of Bangladesh has many success stories with remarkable achievements, innovations and interventions. The promotion of oral rehydration therapy, expanded program of immunisation, polio virus treatment, distribution of Vitamin A capsules, breast feeding campaign, safe water drinking education etc. are interventions of the health sector that are highly appreciated round the world. Equally, the performance of family planning has been termed as a success under a challenging environment.

The population growth rate has been brought down to 1.48 per cent as against 3 per cent in 1975, fertility rate declined to 2.7 per cent from 6 per cent, contraceptive prevalence rate rose to 56 per cent from 7.7 per cent in 1975, and infant mortality rate has come down to forty six from more than a hundred per thousand. Life expectancy has reached to 62 years, indicating the success of the health care delivery system.

The overall health infrastructure in the country is one of the best in the third world. The government, non-government and private sector partnership in Bangladesh is regarded as example by many

nations. The Sector Wide Approach and Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Strategy were innovations of Bangladesh.

There are many weaknesses in the health and family planning programs of Bangladesh. The discriminatory health services, under-utilisation of infrastructure, rapid urbanisation, protecting health from climate changes, adolescent health care, reproductive health, aging population, high risk sexual behaviour, arsenic, and above all, donor dependence and sustainability of the programs are major challenges to this sector.

About 15,000-mothers die annually at the time of delivery, with 3.2 maternal mortality per thousand, and 7000 infants die every day. About 70 percent of pregnant mothers suffer from anaemia, 85 percent of deliveries take place at home, 50 percent of children are stunted, and 45 percent of babies are born with low weight. STI/TRI are increasing rapidly.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to take note of reformation in the formulation of the health policy. The health policies of 1986 and 2000 should be reviewed and revised substantially, with scientific changes in the medical arena. The health policy might make fresh look at the following areas:

### Manpower

Since there is shortage of service providers -- with only one doctor for 4645 patients, one medical assistant for 28,443 patients -- and rampant absenteeism, community health volunteers could be engaged like community police at

grassroots level, especially in hard to reach areas. Bare-foot doctors, paramedics, medical assistants and sub-assistant community medical officers could be trained in collaboration with the private sector.

### Infrastructure management

There could be outsourcing in the management of infrastructure, with leasing out of the UHFWC, THC, and community clinics. There might be a second shift in all medical colleges and specialised government hospitals.

A regulatory framework for approval and management of private clinics should be devised to ensure quality care and proper medication. The tendency of going abroad should be stopped with improved counseling and appropriate treatment.

### Drugs, medicine and MSR

The drug administration department should be totally redesigned, quality medicine should be produced, and exporters of drugs should be encouraged. Private sector entrepreneurs should be given rebate and loan to establish such industries in the country. Social Marketing Company and Essential Drugs Company Limited can take the leadership.

### BCC strategy

Health education and behaviour change communication strategy should have a new look to generate awareness in low performing and hard to reach areas. School health education programs, use of community radio, involvement of



women groups, and partnership with local governments should be part of BCC strategy to reach to the un-served and under-served population.

NGOs and the corporate sector, like Grameen Phone, should be involved, and some electronic media be taken as partners to create a climate in favour of health and hygiene.

Sound pollution, spitting and smoking should be banned, and enforcement should be strict.

### Administrative measures

There could be more devolution and decentralisation of administrative and financial power to CS and DDFP, making them more account-

able and transparent. The budgetary provision for the health sector could be increased, with enhanced allocation for training and research. There should be more grants for hospitals and service centers like BIRDEM, medical colleges etc. There should be serious punishment for negligence in diagnosis and treatment. A client charter of rights should be observed in all service centers.

### Alternate medicine

The role of ayurvedic, unani, homeopathic and alternate medicine practitioners should not be undermined in any way, since almost 60 per cent of the rural population depends on them at the initial

stage. Every *thana* or district hospital should have a place of posting for such medical practitioners.

Finally, health insurance should be introduced in the private sector with support from the government, and a voucher scheme should be undertaken as a safety net for the poor. Physically handicapped and mentally retarded persons should be brought under the policy to be addressed with adequate care.

A good health policy can direct a nation towards economic progress and poverty alleviation, including the achievements of millennium development goals.

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## Inflation and democracy: Connection or confusion

**This writing is not intended to justify a non-elected regime as the panacea for the country's economic ills and inflation. Rather, it argues that the causality between inflation and the form of a government is unclear in economic literature. Despite people's passion for democracy, empirical evidence suggesting lower inflation as an outcome of elected regimes is absent. The policy of a government is more important than its form. The present inflation has deep roots in various domestic and global factors, which many of us have failed to grasp.**

BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

THE confusion about whether the present government is responsible for high inflation in Bangladesh is widespread. Some go as far as to conclude that inflation could not have loomed on the horizon had an elected government been in power. Others argue that democracy is the salvation-mantra for hyperinflation. These claims have neither a theoretical nor an empirical basis.

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Despite people's passion for democracy, empirical evidence suggesting lower inflation as an outcome of elected regimes is absent. The policy of a government

is more important than its form. The present inflation has deep roots in various domestic and global factors, which many of us have failed to grasp.

The present government is unfortunate in the sense that its tenure coincided with the global increase in food and energy prices. The consequences of the long-lasting war on Iraq have begun to unfold. The crude oil price, which was \$50 in January 2007, when this caretaker government took office, is now \$100 per barrel. 100% inflation in the fuel price is impossible to bypass for any government, whether it is democratic or autocratic.

As agriculture in developed countries becomes highly mechanised, higher fuel prices raise the output prices as well. The burgeoning interest in bio-fuels and investments in ethanol are also responsible for soaring food prices. In 2006, 14% of the corn crop in the US was

converted into ethanol; by 2010, that figure will rise to 30%. When the production of corn intended for human consumption decreases, prices go up.

The rising demand for meat in China and India lowered the food supply since a larger amount of crop is needed to feed the animals used for meat. In addition, droughts in Australia, the world's second largest wheat exporter, have lowered the food supply and thereby raised the price to a great extent. As a result, Bangladesh could not avoid the storm.

During the first oil shock in the early 1970s, Bangladesh experienced inflation of more than 50% following a 100% rise in oil prices. Now the country's fuel consumption has become much larger, but inflation is currently 12% (BBS, January '08) although the fuel price inflation over the last one year has been 80%.

It seems that the government is

fighting hard to dampen the full impact of the global inflation mainly driven by the energy sector.

In a country like Bangladesh, people mainly suffer from inflation in the food sector, which is almost 40% as some experts estimate. The spiraling of food prices in the last one-year originated from both domestic and global factors. The domestic production of food in the first place was not adequate for ensuring a fair price.

Given a comfortable position of reserves, the government initially thought of importing food in any amount required. A poor forecast and a lackadaisical approach to a probable food crisis have made the job harder for the government.

The global food prices started soaring and are still on the rise. From 2006 to 2007, prices for grains went up by 42%, cooking oil up by 50%, and dairy products by 80%. The World Food Program predicts that a "perfect storm" is hitting the world's hungry. Importing food products at higher prices must have accelerated Bangladesh's inflation in all sectors.

People can wait for everything but food. This inelasticity in the demand for food caused food prices to skyrocket in the country. In addition to inadequate agricultural output, a 40% increase in grain prices and an 80% increase in energy prices in global markets have made Bangladesh's domestic

inflation severe.

Unfortunately, many of us fail to understand the global link to inflation, and thereby shove the full responsibility onto the shoulder of the government.

The whole of Asia is now grappling with unbridled inflation. Except for the three oil shocks, India could always avoid high inflation. Recently, the country's wholesale price index witnessed 7% inflation as opposed to the 3.1% of last October. China was not ready before the Olympics to let inflation reach its 11-year high. Its inflation is almost 9%; triple the pace of last year.

Pakistan's inflation of almost 20% has gone up to an all-time high. So has Sri Lanka's with 26%. Thailand's price hike has reached a 7-year high. Despite efficient macro management, Singapore's inflation has hit its 25-year high. The storm is sweeping over Asia, regardless of the forms of the governments, while many of us are linking inflation with democracy.

Given the predominant global factors in stoking inflation, the present government has little to do in curbing the price hike. However, there are a few policies the government must stick to. The central bank should be conservative in money growth. The fiscal deficits drive money growth in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri

Lanka. India no longer entertains automatic monetisation of fiscal deficits.

This government has to discover different ways to reduce administrative spending. The anti-corruption drive and the punishment for tax evasion must continue to ensure rapid growth in public revenue.

Measures like day-light-saving, banning gas-guzzlers, reallocating areas for slower vehicles, improving mass transport, speeding up the traffic, and re-arranging office and school hours could save a lot of energy, which we otherwise waste.

Growth and price stability are the two major macro-goals, and will always be a function of energy prices. Hence, we have to devise as many energy-saving methods within our socio-cultural milieu as we can.

The government must make sure that the market forces are playing well to ensure fair prices. Price control and subsidies are never sustainable in the long run. Prompt services for foreign remittance are conducive to building a comfortable reserve position, which will act as insurance in case global food shortage lingers.

In the coming months, it is hard to predict whether inflation will lessen. But we see a glimmer of hope in three lines. First, Bangladesh expects a bumper *boro*

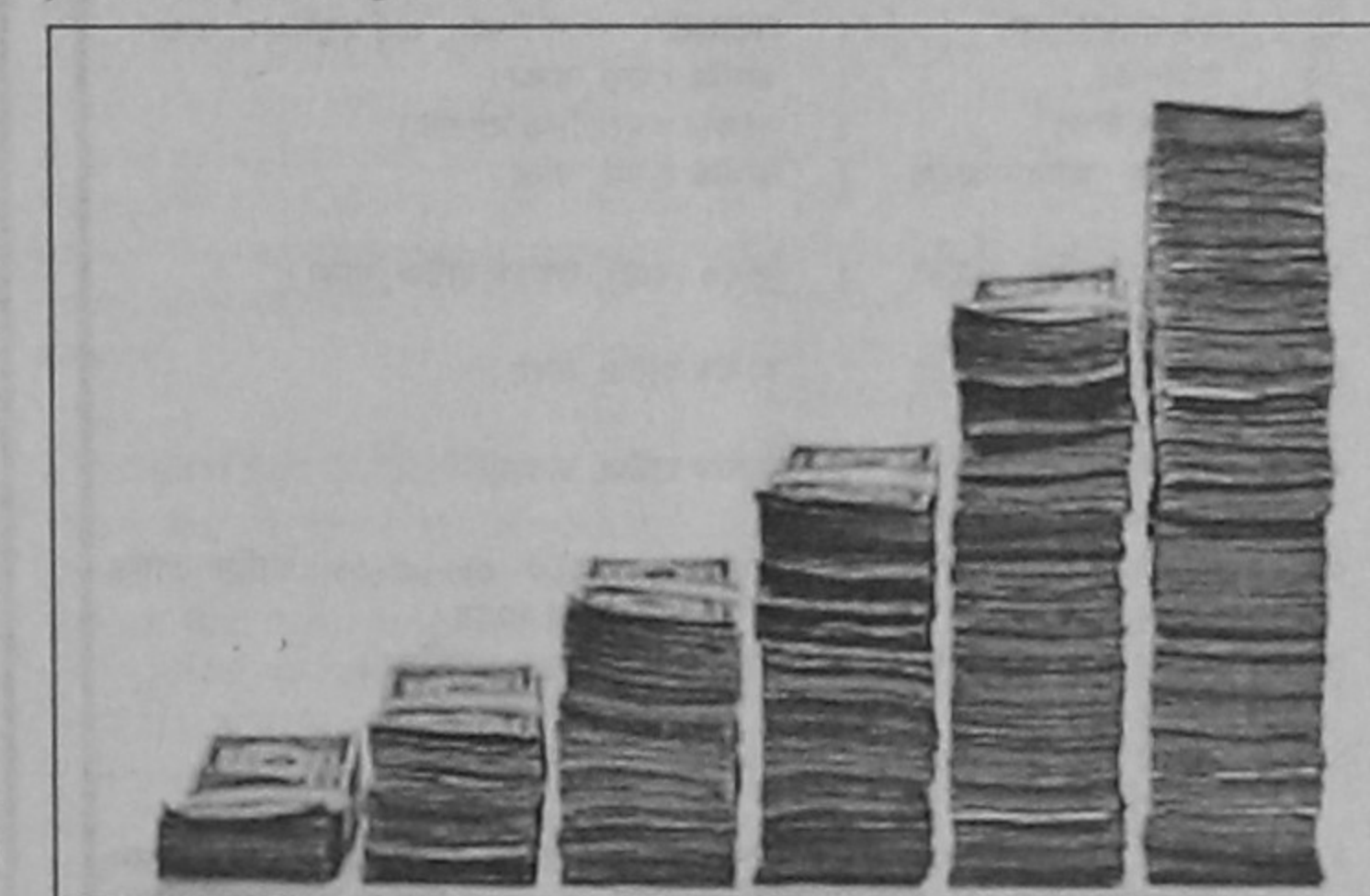
harvest in two months, and this supply will pull food prices down. Second, the impending US recession can drag global prices down. Third, a debilitated American dollar could make imported goods less pricey.

However, the dollar devaluation will reduce our export-competitiveness, and the net effect is still unclear. But the American regime change in November is likely to lower oil prices if the situation in Iraq gets better.

Apart from those possibilities, we can rely on the agricultural sector, which has recently drawn attention from all corners. Institutions to support agricultural finance, procurement, and marketing are on the rise.

More than anything else, inflation makes a government unpopular. This regime appears to be resilient and prompt enough to confront the monster. The outcome is satisfactory, if not excellent. Inflation is no doubt tormenting, but we are in a better shape than many of our neighbours. Hence, differences in political setup do not significantly matter in fighting inflation. The only thing that matters here is an appropriate economic policy.

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A stairway to inflation.

## A collaborative strategy against corruption

**An effective ACC -- with strong political backing -- can become a credible tool for deterring corruption. If Bangladesh wants to establish corruption free business friendly environment, wants to become a country free of poverty and economically strong, where every citizen will enjoy his or her rights and a better quality life, ending corruption is the most important need. It is the responsibility of every stakeholder to respond to this need. Nobody will deny that, in Bangladesh, the past governance mechanism was far less than satisfactory. Many issues and problems were barriers to good governance, equity and social justice.**

SYED AHSANUL ALAM

CORRUPTION is a way of accumulating illegal wealth, which creates inequality and social injustice. It destroys social order, rule of law and all good governance efforts. Corruption and the corrupt are the enemies of people and society. That is why fighting corruption and installing honesty is a precondition for good governance for ensuring human rights, human dignity, equality and social justice, and better business environment.

Today, everybody, including the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, emphasises the designing of a collaborative strategy to limit corruption. The following non-violent, silent strategies may be used to curb corrupt prac-

tices in every sector of Bangladesh.

**Naming and shaming**  
Naming and shaming can be a very effective tactic to eradicate corruption. Even in developing countries, where corruption is accepted as a necessary evil, naming and shaming tactic has been effective in recent years.

In India, high profile cases are uncovered and actively reported, which has led to dismissals of high-level government officials and even criminal action against public figures.

The political governments in Bangladesh in the past have set no such example. But citizen action groups and the media can generate outrage among the public, which can be channeled productively to control and eradicate corruption.

Nobody can undermine the role and power of the media in establishing good governance.

### Creating awareness

Everyday, policy makers, professionals, business leaders, sociologists, economists and others generate an amazing number of ideas and thoughts. The reason that these ideas don't come to fruition is that like-minded reformers seldom collaborate to bring changes.

There are a lot of international and domestic organisations, NGOs, government agencies, opinion leaders and others that are all working on tackling corruption, but in a piece-meal fashion.

A more comprehensive approach to address corruption will be more fruitful. Corruption

can be marginalised if not eliminated if all stakeholders work together in a coordinated manner.

Ideas and thoughts are ineffective if not translated into action. What is important is the commitment of the citizens and leaders of respective fields to take on the challenge of ending corruption, and to do one's own part to address it in a collaborative manner.

Corruption may be viewed from two sides: a demand side and a supply side. The demand side can only be curbed by reforms of institutions, and strengthened enforcement of law by a transparent judiciary.

As the owners of the country, all citizens are affected by corruption and, as such, they should insist on reforms of the legislative, executive and judicial organs of the country.

The stakeholders of a corruption free society should get united to raise their voice against corruption to curb the supply side. Thus, the citizens will have to participate in the battle against corruption, because only moral support to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is not enough.

### Creating awareness in the civil society

Citizens face potential corruption practically at every level and every

sector of life. It could be in the local police, T.N.T, electricity and water authority, municipal corporation or the tax department.

The government alone cannot succeed in combating corruption without the active participation of civil society and citizen action groups. Civil society is in the best position to articulate the grievances of the citizen and highlight priorities of action against corruption to the government.

It can play many important roles -- as observer, critic, analyst, campaigner, or protestor. It can create public awareness against corruption and mobilise citizens to fight against corruption in ways that governments cannot.

Civil society can also play a strong role in organising campaigns against corruption. Center For Good Governance is working with many civic organisations for capacity building of such organisations.

### Creating awareness in chambers and trade bodies

Civil society organisations, citizens' action groups, NGOs, media, and chambers can play a role in improving governance

both in the public and the private sectors. Similarly chambers can be more active by organising seminars, workshops, round tables to generate awareness against corruption and unethical business practices.

They can establish anti-corruption cells with adequate funds to establish liaison with the media, the ACC and other government agencies to combat corruption and protect their members from extortion.

Mega chambers should formulate a code of conduct for their members, and put pressure on the members for compliance. Awareness regarding the code of conduct will have a trickle-down effect on smaller business enterprises, and so on.

### Creating awareness in the private sector

The private sector can play a more active role in rooting out the supply side of corruption. It is painful that most businessmen and citizens look at corrupt practices as a system.

According to unofficial estimates, many business houses just account for it in their books -- as much as 10 percent -- adding to the cost of doing business. Business

leaders as well as the government should take initiatives so that local and foreign investors can set up business enterprises and function in Bangladesh without resorting to corruption and extortion.

After 1/11/07 the ACC visibly started a crusade against corruption, which may be looked upon as a proactive move towards corruption free governance.

For eradicating corruption the private sector must emphasise on internal controls and auditing mechanisms. Corporate bodies and business houses need to set clear and enforceable policies against corrupt or unethical business practices.

Business houses need to periodically train middle and senior management on business ethics to ensure that standards are institutionalised throughout the organisation. Business houses should change their mind-set to prefer managers having comprehensive business education with emphasis on ethics. Business managers cannot afford to be unaware of global ethical standards.

In a developing country, the fight against corruption is not easy. Corruption is a tremendous deterrent to good governance and devel-

opment, and its burden falls heaviest on the shoulders of the poor people.

An effective ACC -- with strong political backing -- can become a credible tool for deterring corruption. If Bangladesh wants to establish corruption free business friendly environment, wants to become a country free of poverty and economically strong, where every citizen will enjoy his or her rights and a better quality life, ending corruption is the most important need. It is the responsibility of every stakeholder to respond to this need.

Nobody will deny that, in Bangladesh, the past governance mechanism was far less than satisfactory. Many issues and problems were barriers to good governance, equity and social justice.

Weak watchdog institutions, corruption, political interference in administration, nepotism, misuse of power, absence of rule of law, non-accountable and non-transparent governments etc. are the common features of our governance, and need to be addressed on an urgent basis.

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