

## Unlocking the potential

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DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

A farmer-friendly budget providing priorities to overcome the challenges of food crisis is the need of the hour. This is very important for unlocking the potential to achieve the target of poverty alleviation. In fact, attaining sustainability in food production is not only the expectation of the citizens but is also a farmer's right.

This strategy of development planning is obviously not new in the financial disciplines, but the demonstration of the same by the head of the government, as we witnessed on May 15, is certainly a new phenomenon. The chief adviser personally joined farmer Mr. Year Muhammad in harvesting the boro paddy in the village of Cheradengi of Dinajpur district. This has generated a tremen-

dous enthusiasm among the farmers throughout the country, and also among planners and agricultural extension workers, about the commitment and expectation of the government.

Never before had any head of government been so near to the farmers with the message to grow more food and a promise of all-out support from the government.

The chief adviser, in the farmer's rally organised at Dinajpur, declared an agriculture-friendly budget in which farmers' rights and interests would be prioritised. Development specialists consider this commitment a new dimension in budgeting and poverty alleviation for unlocking the potential as described in the PRSP.

This farmer-friendly budget must be capable of reviving hope in the lives of marginal, distressed

and landless farmers. It is commonly believed that the budget of the fiscal year 2008-2009 will be revolutionary, getting rid of the traditional calculation of duties and taxes in the budgets as we observed before.

There is acute crisis of food in the world market. The price spiral, conversion of corn to fuel, and supremacy of the syndicates controlling the market have created an alarming environment for the existence of unfortunate farmers living below the poverty line.

To some economists, this is the unfortunate result of free-market economy and the inefficiency of FAO or diplomacy of WTO. President Bush sanctioned a grant of \$770 million to overcome the crisis. Madam Condoleezza Rice has blamed the Indian and Chinese for their tendency to eat more rice, thus creating food crisis

round the world.

Out of a total area of 3 crore and 74 lakh acres of land, total cultivable land in Bangladesh is about 2 crore 5 lakh acres at present. There are about 8 lakh acres of fallow land. A few lakh acres of land in char areas are neglected and under-utilised. About 50 lakh acres of khas land (farming and non-farming) and water bodies are under the occupation of powerful persons.

A study conducted by Dr. Abul Barkat revealed that 71% of the total land in Bangladesh is under the occupation of only 22% of the total population at present.

Agricultural land is gradually getting reduced due to increasing housing, construction of roads and highways, soil erosion, floods and tidal bores. In addition, land grabbers in collaboration with officials of land departments have compelled the marginal farmers to become land-less and migrate to cities for survival as hawkers or rickshaw-pullers.

In this scenario, it is expected that the budget will provide support to farmers with subsidies, make arrangement for adequate for production and distribution of

fertilisers, and encourage the production and use of compost fertilisers and eco-fertilisers on a wide scale.

There could be review of rules for import of notified crops like paddy, wheat, potato, sugarcane and jute seed that might enable the farmers to intensify cultivation.

The budget should create opportunities for diversification of crops, involvement of cooperatives in the marketing of agricultural produces, anti-hoarding measures, and import of agricultural implements and accessories to encourage the farmers and traders involve in the agricultural arena.

There should be package provisions for remissions of loans advanced to farmers by banks, financial institutions and cooperative societies with replenishment by the government.

This year, the government of India provided RS. 60,000 crores in their budget as subsidy to support the farmers from indebtedness. Besides, procurement of paddy, wheat and maize from the farmers directly, in lieu of the present system of buying from millers, could be arranged with revision of



city radio, encouragement of publication of magazines, weeklies and periodicals on agriculture, and massive use of documentaries of the agriculture information bureau should be taken as strategies for which the budget can give some indications to support awareness building.

None should remain indifferent about the population growth posing positive threat of more food crisis in future. The present population of 14.20 crores might reach 17.20 crores by 2020, and 28.20 crores by 2051. The rapid increase in urban population, making the urban to rural ratio 50:50 by 2020, will eventually reduce the number of farmers.

The elected government destined to implement the next six months of this budget shall not deviate from these strategies in spite the political commitments and priorities that they might have in their agenda. We would like to see a realistic farmer-friendly budget for the greater welfare of the nation, and also for unlocking the potential for poverty alleviation.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former adviser to caretaker government.

## 30 years of innovation

**HKI began working in Bangladesh in 1978 to support the government's Blindness Prevention Program. Thirty years later, HKI reflects on a diverse track record, that includes the first Nutritional Blindness survey in 1982, the first large-scale home-gardening, nutrition education project in 1990, and the world's longest Nutritional Surveillance Project in a developing country -- conducted from 1990-2006.**

INNOVATION means introducing changes for the betterment of human existence. This month, Helen Keller International (HKI) is celebrating 30 years of innovation in Bangladesh through its programs, which address poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and poor health.

Established in 1915, HKI is among the oldest international non-profit organisations devoted to fighting and treating preventable blindness, malnutrition and poverty. HKI provides development opportunities and builds local capacity by establishing nutrition and eye health programs in partnership with governments and local organisations.

Currently, HKI offers programs in 23 countries around the world, and has a long and successful history of work in the Asia-Pacific

region. HKI began working in Bangladesh in 1978 to support the government's Blindness Prevention Program. Thirty years later, HKI reflects on a diverse track record, that includes the first Nutritional Blindness survey in 1982, the first large-scale home-gardening, nutrition education project in 1990, and the world's longest Nutritional Surveillance Project in a developing country -- conducted from 1990-2006.

**Eye health and nutritional blindness**

HKI/Bangladesh remains committed to the goal set by Helen Keller herself -- to lessen the suffering of those most in need.

The organisation is known throughout the world as a leader in addressing vitamin A deficiency through research, evidence-based

programming and social marketing. HKI's first program in Bangladesh, in fact, was assisting the government in monitoring and improving the distribution of high-dose vitamin A capsules through the Bangladesh Program for Prevention of Blindness (BPPP).

In 1982-83, HKI collaborated with the government of Bangladesh to conduct the Bangladesh Nutritional Blindness Study (BNBS). This study determined the number of children who had received vitamin A supplementation, and provided the basis for the vitamin A policy in Bangladesh for more than 15 years.

The main determinant of vitamin A deficiency is the dietary intake of vitamin A, which is inadequate for the majority of households in Bangladesh, making the National Vitamin A Capsule (VAC)

campaign an essential strategy for child survival.

Throughout the 1990s, HKI initiated programs for the awareness and social marketing of vitamin A programs, and provided technical support in carrying out the national Vitamin A Campaign (VAC).

Although the government of Bangladesh's national VAC strategy is a globally recognised success, there are pockets of the population which are not being reached with live-saving vitamin, such as the urban slums and some geographically hard-to-reach areas of the country.

Currently, HKI is supporting community mobilisation and an extensive community awareness project in the hard-to-reach areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) to ensure that all families are aware of the benefits of vitamin A, and to encourage them to give vitamin A to children aged 9 to 59 months.

In the late 1980s, HKI provided technical assistance to the Bangladesh government to address the lack of educational and social opportunities for blind or visually impaired people. HKI

supported Bangladesh's nationwide Integrated Education Program and the Child Vision Project (2002-2006) by offering improved access to key training, information, communication and education (IEC) materials, and technical assistance and services to the schools and their resource teachers.

HKI continues to campaign and advocate for the broader needs of the disabled population in Bangladesh.

**Food based strategies**

Today, against the backdrop of the rising food prices and basic commodity price hikes, more people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life, making hunger and malnutrition the number one risk to health worldwide. Bangladesh is one of the worst-off countries with regards to malnutrition.

One way to address the problem of malnutrition is to make food available at the household level through household food production strategies. Based on findings from the nutritional blindness study, HKI initiated a food production program to pro-

vide increased consumption of vitamin A-rich foods through home gardening as early as 1989.

In 2003, the program was expanded to include animal husbandry, since animal source foods are the best sources of dietary vitamin A. HKI's Homestead Food Production Program (HFPP) is currently being implemented in selected vulnerable geographic areas such as the chars in northern Bangladesh, the hilly areas of the CHT and the coastal belt of southern Bangladesh in an effort to establish a long-term, sustainable food-based strategy to improve access to, and availability of, a variety of foods at the household level.

Food-based strategies are imperative for addressing household food insecurity as, in 2006, HKI and Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) reported findings from the Nutritional Surveillance Project (NSP) that only four percent of rural households in Bangladesh could afford an optimal or balanced diet.

The NSP findings also alluded to the poor infant and young child feeding practices across Bangladesh, which underly the

poor nutritional status of children under two years of age.

HKI was the first among donors and practitioners to integrate the Essential Nutrition Actions (ENA) into its existing agriculture and health programs. ENA is an integrated package of health interventions that focus on children under two years of age, and pregnant and lactating women.

HKI's ENA pilot project in the northern char areas, which integrates optimal infant and young child feeding practices and women's nutrition into the Homestead Food Production Program, has proven to be an effective strategy to improve child nutritional status.

HKI provides technical assistance to partner NGOs through training and by providing communication materials. HKI also provides regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure effective integration of ENA into existing programs.

**Monitoring and evaluation par excellence**

Surveys, evaluations and intervention research form the backbone of all HKI's activities, and the

organisation has extensive experience in linking research to program development.

HKI collects and disseminates information that informs program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and identifies critical issues and unmet needs that call for action.

HKI is devoted to help meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as VISION 2020, The Right to Sight.

For 30 years, HKI in Bangladesh has played a leading role in fighting and treating preventable blindness, malnutrition and poverty. At this critical juncture, mid-way to the 2015 MDGs, HKI stands ready to serve and contribute to accelerating Bangladesh's progress towards meeting the needs of those that are most disadvantaged.

As Helen Keller said: "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much." With special tribute to our donors and partners, we are proudly celebrating 30 years of innovation in Bangladesh.

Compiled by Parvez Babul, Information and Advocacy Officer of Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.

## Food security by government not workable

**Besides, storage space in government warehouses is limited and encourages pilferage, and large rodents that fatten on it. This depletes the stock, but the ledger books have the same figures. Additionally, grains stored in government warehouses are often unfit for human consumption. The management and storage of surpluses in the private sector would be safer, and better, as their investments and profits depend on safekeeping.**

NIZAM AHMAD

IT is distressing to hear recommendations from our food experts, politicians, and economists on how the government of Bangladesh could determine food security for the country. They advise the restoration of TCB and BADC and, among many others, punishment of traders for price manipulation and hoarding.

The government has responded with a threat to deal severely with illegal traders to limit hoarding, and with all other market intrusions that coerce, deride, and ignore the role of the private sector in its ability, if free, to secure food for our people.

The government buys only a small portion of the total rice production. This purchase of a mere one or two percent of the total production cannot be a sufficient inventory to feed the whole population, or to change market prices upwards or downwards.

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Additionally, grains stored in government warehouses are often unfit for human consumption. The management and storage of surpluses in the private sector would be safer, and better, as their investments and profits depend on safekeeping.

At times of famine or high prices, the government and charities can buy items from the private wholesalers for distribution, or for feed programs, as and where required.

Amartya Sen's famous "entitlements" will only work if food stocks are available, and do not disappear, or be smuggled out due to severe government restrictions in the grain market.

In 1974, due to military crackdowns on hoarders, rice readily moved across the borders, because traders and stockists risked severe punishment and the seizure of their stocks.

Reportedly, some powerful politicians were involved in the cross-border trade then, as their big names kept the military away, but the fact remains that the

hard-line policies to arrest, search, or "shoot at sight" compelled the traders to sell across the border, to start a black market, or lose all.

Our experts can say that if the Western governments can successfully provide food, health, and electricity -- why can't we. There are a few reasons why we can't. First, the industrial wealth of the West subsidise their agriculture. They do not have to borrow or depend on aid to boost agriculture. In addition, the Western governments function under the rule of law, that checks corruption.

When the massive subsidisation program began, the West had democracy, a free media, and independent courts. These ensured transparency and accountability.

Nevertheless, the West is becoming increasingly aware of its great folly in involving governments in food and agriculture. In every rich Western country, the government is steadily dismantling subsidisation and the provision of food or health, or anything that the private sector produces better and cheaper. These are no

more economic issues but political.

Agricultural trade is the same as any other trade. The criteria for success are also the same. No trade can expand without the freedom to trade, regionally or internationally, and without a liberalised financial system.

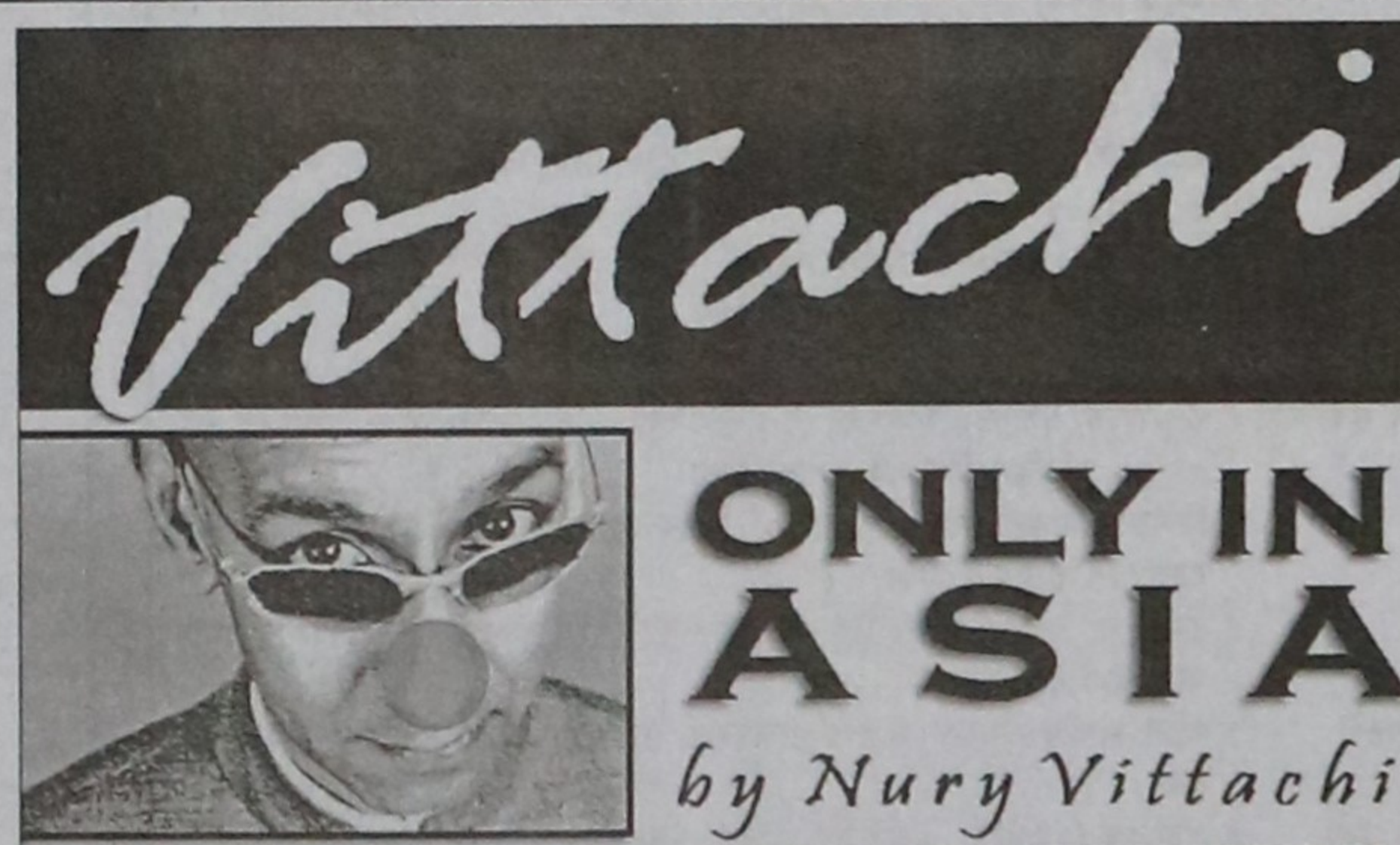
If this simple rationale guides our agricultural policy, it can attract huge investments, since our population is large and so is the demand. Investments would boost production and guarantee food security.

Our agriculture is the biggest sector in the country, yet the most restricted. This is the major cause of rural poverty. Economic orders of the government create shortages, fear and uncertainty, and unleash needless persecution of traders.

The government's decision to ban rice exports and limit the period for keeping stock, denies the economic freedom of the farmers. It deprives them of profits. Smuggling and black markets may return, as in 1974.

The golden jute era ended due to government interference, and so has everything that governments handled. But, jute can still flourish as the world is eco-friendly, and so can agriculture, or the production of electricity, but only if market freedom is guaranteed, not government intervention, subsidisation, or the resurrection of TCB or BADC.

Nizam Ahmad is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



## When books were a dangerous form of new technology

SOMETIMES I hit a raw nerve. Several readers complained about my criticism of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. This is a youth-oriented computer game in which players get points by committing extremely anti-social acts such as armed robbery, substance abuse and making poor clothing choices.

Hey -- what I really meant was that I don't need this game because I get quite enough of this sort of thing at home already.

Well, to all the Jin-Jins out there, I have absolutely no objection to

boys turning themselves into mindless killing machines, providing you all take your guns and go and live on some isolated continent miles away from me. (Oh, you have done? You're in America?)

The most interesting response came from a philosophical reader who said people have been scared of new technology since the time of the ancient Greeks.

Actually, he makes a fair point, and his timing is good. Today, June 2, is the anniversary of the day Guglielmo Marconi (known to his friends as "the nerd with the unpronounceable first name") filed his patent on radio transmissions in 1896. Marconi's invention triggered howls of protest from people who said radio was dangerous new technology which would stop people reading and writing.

Similarly, in the 1950s, there was a campaign against typewriters because they would "depersonalise communications

between businessmen." This is an obvious fallacy: whoever heard of a businessman with a personality?

In the Victorian era, there was a campaign against erasers because they would stop students thinking deeply before they wrote. Now, come on: has anyone ever seen a student thinking deeply?

Two millenniums ago, Socrates campaigned against reading and writing. In those days, wisdom was delivered exclusively through something called "oral tradition," which basically meant Men With Beards Talking. Socrates warned:

- If people started reading and writing, their memories would wither from underuse;
- they would read out the words of Men With Beards and look cleverer than they really were, and
- the world would become democratic, upsetting the elite.

Socrates was right, but he could not foresee that East Asian leaders

would have the ability to keep their faces straight while telling people who have waited 2,400 years for democracy that they are "too impatient."

But anyway, Socrates' criticisms were ignored, and so were the criticisms of people who wanted to ban radio, erasers and typewriters. Has society been dumbed down?

Actually, I think it has. Consider this. When Marconi died in 1937, the world wanted to do something to commemorate his work. You know what humanity decided to do? They took every audio broadcaster off the air for two minutes. To celebrate the invention of radio. Ouch.

When I think of that, I can't help but hope that humanity dies off soon, so that the world can be recolonised by a more intelligent species, such as mushrooms.

But if Jin-Jin is still around, he will probably shoot them.

Smarter than a mushroom? Then don't visit www.vittachi.com.