

No land, no growth

Once the constraint imposed by land shortage is recognised by policy-makers, programs can be adopted in phases. A long-term development vision with adequate emphasis on the constraints related to land scarcity is an urgent need for sustaining the present development momentum of Bangladesh.

RUSHIDAN ISLAM RAHMAN

INSUFFICIENT investment growth is one of the most important constraints on the economic growth of Bangladesh. Therefore, development policies have rightly emphasised the need to raise savings and investment rates. Emphasis on investment growth has been placed in the context of an abundance of labour. Recently, "labour constraints" received attention when the shortage in "skilled and employable" labour was felt.

In contrast, a key feature of Bangladesh, which can act as a bottleneck to economic and social development, was somewhat neglected. The constraint posed by low land-to-population ratio and its implications for growth in non-farm sector activities received inadequate attention.

I wish to highlight the nature of the problems caused by the shrinking per capita land availability. In fact, it can be argued that the apparent disappearance of surplus labour and demand for higher wages by industrial labourers has indirect links with the tightening of the land constraint.

Constraints linked to countries' geographical location have been highlighted in various ways. For example, being land-locked, or being a small island country, creates specific bottlenecks. Too-small land area per person can be a natural resource-related constraint. This constraint is quite unique for Bangladesh (apart from the small island countries).

Land constraint, to some extent, has received attention in the context of agricultural production. Since agricultural land is declining (according to some estimates, at the rate of one percent per annum), the imperative of producing enough food (especially foodgrain) requires the adoption of yield maximising policies.

The decline in agricultural land was caused by many factors, the most important being:

- Use of land for non-farm production activities.
- Infrastructure building (roads, bridges, highways etc).
- Housing needs of a growing population.
- Social needs (schools, health centres, entertainment facilities etc).

The way land constraint affects industrialisation is not always apparent and requires elaboration. To achieve accelerated growth of industry and service sector GDP, capital investment is essential. A special feature of Bangladesh's industrial growth is that land and premise investment constitutes a significant part of total resource invested.

Land constraint is more acute for industries with higher labour intensity, e.g., the RMG sub-

sector. Building rent forms a large share of the cost of non-farm activities. Thus, there is a tendency to squeeze more workers into a small floor-space, causing an unhealthy work environment. Nonetheless, this cannot be a permanent solution.

One may use "development with surplus labour" theories and argue that labour cost will be low in such densely populated countries, which will counteract other costs. In fact, the labour intensive export industries' initial success was due to cheap labour availability, along with other factors.

However, low labour cost cannot sustain the process of industry and service sector growth indefinitely. Land shortage can physically constrain expansion of industrial enterprises.

For example, scaling up of certain production activities may be profitable only if an adjacent building is available. This reduces supervision cost, but is often impossible in crowded cities or suburbs. Family labour-based enterprises that operate from one's house cannot be scaled up with a rented house which is not adjacent.

Service provision requires a comfortable area for each customer. If customers are refused service because the "waiting space" is full, the enterprise cannot survive. A fast food outlet (an international chain franchise) in a crowded part of Dhaka possibly serves the most (in comparison to other low-income countries) customers per square feet per day. Such a congested environment may go against food safety standards.

Constraints faced by urban informal sector enterprises deserve attention. These enterprises are located on roadsides, footpaths, the outskirts of kitchen markets and other public land. If they have to pay full rent for such land, many of them will become unprofitable.

Such spaces have almost been exhausted and further growth of Dhaka's informal sector is undesirable, since it will cause congestion and deterioration of urban services. Toll collection for these spaces became profitable for local mastaans because of their scarcity. Moreover, the high cost of land scarcity cannot be nullified through low labour cost. As the cost of living rises, the labour cost of Dhaka, or its suburbs, will rise. Dhaka's RMG workers are demanding wage hike, which is linked to the rising cost of living -- a large part of which is rent.

Housing rent paid by low-income earners is often higher than good residential area apartment rent. Moreover, "safe" shelters for low-income employees are getting scarcer as marginal/low quality land areas are being transferred to "developers" who use it to construct houses for higher-income groups.

During the last 3-4 decades, employment generation through public programs has been



No room to breathe!

instrumental in poverty alleviation. They create useful physical infrastructure, and generate a long-lasting positive impact on economic growth as well. However, the scope of such programs can be severely constrained by the lack of public (khas) land where earth cutting takes place.

Therefore, policy-makers and development program designers have to carefully identify strategies to ease constraints. There will possibly be an agreement on the need for determined efforts to bring down population growth rate. Bangladesh achieved a reduction of Total Fertility Rate (TFR) during the early development phase.

The success was, however, halted due to complacency. Programs and policies faced bottlenecks and implementation difficulties. The process must be reversed. The present government should set specific targets on this front and adopt programs to achieve the targets.

These policies can bear fruit only after a few years, while the decline of per person land area will continue until zero population growth is achieved. Therefore, specific priorities should be set; the development agenda can include steps for proper use of the country's small territory. The following are some general suggestions, which can form the basis of specific programs with detailed time-bound targets in the budget 2010-2011.

- Planned rural housing should receive priority and guidelines for rural land use should be formulated so that the area of land used for productive activities can be maximised.
- Land administration and systematic maintenance of land records will play critical roles in this context.
- In the design of safety net Employment

Scheme detailed plans should be drawn for rural infrastructure building on the basis of public land use.

- Create three large cities in different parts of the country. Invite views of entrepreneurs and trade bodies on the facilities required to make those places attractive for investment in industry and service enterprises. If such initiatives are adopted without examining demand, these places may suffer the same fate as the industrial zones/EPZs created in the past, which did not attract investors. The essential element of spatially dispersed and decentralised industrialisation is needed to ensure adequate power/gas supply and to improve safety and security measures. Creation of facilities for good quality education and health services at costs lower than such services in Dhaka or Chittagong can provide added incentive. This can also be an important step towards reducing regional inequality.
- Low-cost housing facilities should be created for low-income workers, which may be viewed as a subsidy to the workers as well as employers. Such schemes may be introduced in new industrial areas.

This is not an exhaustive list. Once the constraint imposed by land shortage is recognised by policy-makers, programs can be adopted in phases. A long-term development vision with adequate emphasis on the constraints related to land scarcity is an urgent need for sustaining the present development momentum of Bangladesh.

Dr. Rushidan Islam Rahman Research Director, BIDS.

Standing at Ground Zero

A few weeks ago, traveling in Kazakhstan, I had the sobering experience of standing at Ground Zero. This was the notorious test site at Semipalatinsk, where the Soviet Union detonated 456 nuclear weapons between 1947 and 1989.

BAN KI-MOON

A few weeks ago, traveling in Kazakhstan, I had the sobering experience of standing at Ground Zero. This was the notorious test site at Semipalatinsk, where the Soviet Union detonated 456 nuclear weapons between 1947 and 1989.

Apart from a circle of massive concrete plinths, designed to measure the destructive power of the blasts, there was little on the vast and featureless stepped to distinguish this place. For decades it was an epicenter of the cold war -- like similar sites in the United States, a threat to life on our planet. Its dark legacy endures: poisoned rivers and lakes, children suffering from cancer and birth defects.

Today, Semipalatinsk has become a powerful symbol of hope. On August 29, 1991, shortly after independence, President Nursultan Nazarbayev closed the site and abolished nuclear weapons. It was a tangible expression of a dream that has long eluded us -- a world free of nuclear weapons. And now, for the first time in a generation, we can be optimistic.

On the day I stood at Ground Zero, President Barack Obama announced a review of the United States' nuclear posture. Leading by example, he renounced the development of new nuclear weapons and foreswore their first-use against nations in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT. Two days later, President Obama and the president of the Russian Federation, Dimitry Medvedev, signed a new START treaty in Prague -- a fresh start on a truly noble aspiration.

Momentum is building around the world. Governments and civil society groups, often at odds, have begun working in a common cause. At the recent nuclear security summit in Washington, 47 world leaders agreed to do whatever was necessary to keep such weapons and materials safe. Their shared sense of urgency reflects an accepted reality. Nuclear terrorism is not a Hollywood fantasy. It can happen.

The United Nations is destined to be at the centre of these efforts. Just recently, the UN General Assembly held a special debate on nuclear disarmament and security. This in itself grew out of a five-point nuclear action plan that I had proposed, in late 2008, as well as an historic summit meeting of the Security Council last September.

This week (May 3), leaders come together at the UN for the periodic NPT review conference. Their last gathering, five years ago, was an acknowledged failure. This year, by contrast, we can look for advances on a range of issues. We should not be unrealistic in our expectations. But neither can we afford to lose this opportunity for progress: on disarmament; on compliance with non-proliferation commitments, including the pursuit of a nuclear weapons free-zone in the Middle East; on the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Looking ahead, I have proposed a UN conference later this year to review the implementation of the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism. We will host a ministerial-level meeting to push the pace on bringing the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty into force, and I have urged leaders to begin negotiations for a binding treaty on fissile materials. In October, the General Assembly will consider more than 50 resolutions on various nuclear issues. Our aim: to take the many small steps, today, that will set the stage for a larger breakthrough tomorrow.

All this work reflects the priorities of our member states, shaped in turn by public opinion. Everyone recognises the catastrophic danger of nuclear weapons. Just as clearly, we know the threat will last as long as these weapons exist. The Earth's very future leaves us no alternative but to pursue disarmament. And there is little prospect of that without global cooperation.

Where if not at the United Nations, could we look for such cooperation? Bilateral and regional negotiation can accomplish much, but long-lasting and effective cooperation on a global scale requires more. The United Nations is that forum, along with the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The UN is the world's sole universally accepted arena for debate and concord, among nations as well as broader society. It serves not only as a repository of treaties but also of information documenting their implementation. It is a source of independent expertise, coordinating closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The United Nations stands today at a new Ground Zero -- a "ground zero" for global disarmament, no longer a place of dread but of hope. Those who stand with us share the vision of a nuclear-free world. If ever there were a time for the world's people to demand change, to demand action beyond the cautious half-measures of the past, it is now.

Ban Ki-moon is Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Placed by UNIC Dhaka.



A swimming pool in historic Laldighi!



The idea of a modern swimming pool inside the Laldighi is not in character with the historic site. It is incompatible land use as the traditional financial and administrative district with retail business activities surrounds the dighi.

S. ZARINA HOSSAIN

FOR every Bangalee, the word *dighi* will evoke feelings of serenity. A water body in the midst of nature -- calm cool surface shaded with native trees and frequented by birds, bees and butterflies. Grand steps provided opportunities for social interaction. Gifted by affluent landlords of Bengal, dighis met the drinking water needs of the community, thereby sustaining rural life.

Now, replace this character of the *dighi* with chlorinated waters of a swimming pool. Replace the natural setting with manufactured

products -- tiles, glass and aluminum. Replace history and heritage with so-called modern urban amenity.

This is the project initiated by the Chittagong City Corporation. Almost one-third of Laldighi is going to be replaced by a "modern swimming pool!" Another portion will be turned into a "performing stage." Perhaps to retain its historic name a small mid-section will remain as the *dighi*! We do not know for whom this modern amenity is being constructed. We are to understand that it is being built for international athletes.

We have also read reports that it is for stu-

dents of educational institutions.

A modern swimming pool, if intended for athletics, should be associated with a sports complex. An appropriate site may be selected in Sagarika or Chittagong stadium area. New sporting facilities may be created in new areas. Such recommendations exist in the Detailed Area Plan (DAP), the statutory planning document prepared by CDA.

If it is for students, it should be located in a safe and secure environment -- in close proximity to educational institutions -- not in the midst of a busy financial centre. Possible sites could be in or adjacent to collegiate schools -- Nasirabad Womens' College, Chittagong College, Khastagir Girls School or other such sites.

If it is for leisure, or as general urban amenity, it should be in close proximity to a residential area such as Panchlaish, Agrabad, Halishahar etc. What remains of the Jamboree Maat (field) may also be an appropriate location.

Swimming pools are expensive facilities. Who are the target users here? Will it be a public service at nominal charge? Will CCC be able to maintain it? Is it a business venture for profit? What would be the user charge? Can the target users afford it? What would be mode of transport of users? Are there sufficient parking arrangements and dropping areas? Will the pool be covered? If not, females will be excluded due to the adjacent mosque. If covered, how will character of the dense city centre change? What are the environmental and cultural consequences? The openness in the midst of urban concrete settings will be lost.

The Laldighi area consists of the large water reservoir with a small park and an adjacent open ground known as the Laldighi Maat. More than 150 years ago, Zaminder Rajprakesh Ghosh had donated this property for public welfare. The reservoir provided drinking water for the community.

Historically, Laldighi Maat had been the focal point of all political activity prior to the days of partition. It still is. All national and local political leadership still revolves with public speeches from the Laldighi Maat. No one can be considered a leader if he/she has not addressed public gatherings from the Laldighi Maat. Culturally, it is the venue for the famous

annual *Boli Khela* (wrestling competition) and is the centre of the three-day local fair.

Professionally speaking, the idea of a modern swimming pool inside the Laldighi is not in character with the historic site. It is incompatible land use as the traditional financial and administrative district with retail business activities surrounds the *dighi*. A *dighi* and a swimming pool are both water bodies.

However, one is an amenity for mass welfare; the other is an amenity for the few who can afford its use. One is in its natural setting, the other operates only in a controlled environment with mechanical and chemically-controlled waters. One or more swimming pools can be constructed if one has the funds; a nation has to wait many years for a Laldighi! This *dighi* is no place for a swimming pool.

The surrounding hill tract districts and Cox's Bazaar routinely attracts thousands of tourists. The city can be made attractive for them to spend a day or two. If fund generation is an issue, the CCC can generate funds by engaging designers and making this area inviting and attractive, not by making a swimming pool or a high rise buildings or shops -- if it plans to! DAP recommended the conservation of the area due to its potential tourism value. The government approved the document on January 25, 2009.

We fail to understand the disrespect for urban planning and the process behind the choice of projects and sites by CCC and other development organisations in Bangladesh. Conscientious citizens have had to protest unilateral and whimsical decisions by the heads of such institutions. This is not a healthy practice.

Urban local governments and city corporations have to be strengthened to meet the challenges of urbanisation and become the focal point of development. A nation or a city can only be great when its institutions operate in a democratic, professional, transparent and participatory manner. We are waiting for this government to make this happen. Without such practice we will not attain a city rooted to its culture and, at the same time, be prosperous and liveable.

S. Zarina Hossain is an Architect / Urban Planner and Member of Forum for Planned Chittagong.