

Selected extracts from the July issue of Forum

Digital Bangladesh: A grassroots approach



ANIR CHOUDHURY

IT is vital to realise that Digital Bangladesh is not a promise for a different world. It is actually a promise for the same world, but much better, much quicker, much more responsive and less costly.

At the same time, it is a different world to different people. To a student, it is higher quality of education and being market-ready; to a farmer, it is right information at the right time at the right place; to a patient, it is access to quality healthcare without having to stand in long queues for days; to a serving government officer, it is triumph of merit and performance over

connections; to a retired government officer, to a freedom fighter, and to a widow, it is delivery of safety nets and pensions transparently. To all, it is services they deserve and should expect at their doorsteps.

Such a world is only possible if the focus for all "Digital Bangladesh" initiatives focus primarily on the end customers' perspective and not an internal automation perspective in the beginning. Automation should be done as much as is needed to serve the end customers.

Bangladeshis have grown to expect that the government will dispense public information and services to them as a favour and not as a part of

their responsibility. Moreover, to avail themselves of this favour, they have to go long distances to government offices, stand in long queues in rain and sun, and sometimes give in to rent seeking. If they are lucky, they will receive the information and services in one visit.

However, most will end up making multiple trips, spending on travel and overnight accommodation a few times the "official" cost of accessing the service. A child is born into a culture where money or powerful connections are necessary to expedite service delivery and rarely finds out in his or her lifetime that most of these services are inalienable rights.

In the nondescript backwaters of Bangladesh, ICTs are changing the age-old unpopular culture, along with the mindset of government service providers. In a matter of eighteen months, tens of e-services have sprung up throughout the country. Citizens can now pay their electricity gas and phone bills through mobile phones, download English lessons, and consult with a doctor remotely.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 5.

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The good, the bad, and, the uncertain

SYEED AHAMED

IS this expansionary budget ambitious? Yes. But is this a criticism or a compliment?

The finance minister has argued that such a big budget is a necessity given the size of the population. In terms of per capita budget expenditure, Bangladesh is way behind India, Indonesia, and Pakistan, and suddenly our budget looks so inadequate. However, this budget aims to considerably increase Bangladesh's per capita budget expenditure from around 90 dollars spent in F2009 to 129 dollars in FY2011.

Pakistan's per capita development outlay in FY2009 was 33 dollars, whereas India's was 80 dollars. In their respective budgets, Pakistan and India aim increase the per capita develop-

ment outlay to 54 dollars and 97 dollars in FY2011.

Bangladesh with a huge population compared to its smaller economy, is also set to gradually increase its per capita public investment. Bangladesh's per capita development (including non-ADP development) expenditure was less than 22 dollars in FY2009. The budget for FY2011 aims to increase that per capita development expenditure to 42 dollars.

The budget also aims to revive the declining trend of annual development program. The actual implementation of ADP in terms of GDP has been witnessing a chronic downfall since FY2000. Actual ADP as percentage of GDP fell from 6.5% in FY2000 to only 3.2% in FY2009.

The target ADP (Tk. 38,500 crore) for FY2011 is not only high in nominal terms, it will also be higher in terms of

GDP even after 85% of this target ADP is implemented by FY2011.

So yes, this is an ambitious budget. Ambition is an integral part of any development plan and not necessarily a bad thing. More importantly, this big budget seeks to remain progressive as it aims to tax the richer people with high tax on luxury items, while offering rural subsidies and poverty reduction programs. Considering our ever-increasing economic inequality and the tendency of our policy makers to disregard the growth-inequality nexus, this budget looks more pro-poor.

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Meeting the major targets

FAHMIDA KHATUN

IN a modern democratic society, the national budget does not merely delineate the sources of revenues and identify the channels of resource flow to various directions of the economy.

The budget in fact guides and manages the economy, since through the budget document the government can collect taxes from the citizens of the country, and plan expenditures for various development programs, which is why the budget can have impact on the growth and the lives of people.

The national budget is also about the long-term vision of sustained growth, which can, in fact, be attained through budgetary allocations and policy incentives. The first budget

(FY10) of the ruling Awami League during its current tenure did spell out a number of medium- and long-term objectives, some of which looked forward as far as 2021 and most of which were in line with the promises of its election manifesto.

Those visions have been repeated in the budget of FY11 through the announcement of a host of promises such as job creation, increase in social safety net allocations, and reduction of regional inequality to achieve balanced growth, agricultural development, achieving power generation targets towards industrialisation, and improvement in infrastructure for the creation of Digital Bangladesh.

Various sectoral policies have been devised in the budget document to achieve those objectives. While the

attainment of various objectives is essential for accelerated growth, it should also be realised by policy makers that numbers do not matter to common people.

What is important to them is the delivery of services in terms of health, education, employment, and income. This can be delivered through political commitment, which will not only plan but also implement a budget towards delivering on the annual goals and achieving long-term objectives of eradication of poverty and establishment of social justice in the country.

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Fixing the system

NAIRA KHAN

IT is very easy and attractive to state that we want a creative education system with a proper learning outcome. However the reality is that the education culture of this sub-continent is geared towards obtaining marks, and hence is an exam-oriented system.

Therefore, if the structure of the exam is changed, then studying for the exams and trying to excel in them will automatically bring about a change in teaching and classroom lessons, with creativity automatically percolating from the centre to the farthest outreaches of the system.

If we change the structure of the exam and design questions in such a manner that students will not be able answer with blocks of text from their prescribed reading, then we automatically eliminate the possibility of plagiarism.

That is not to say that we do not need to create awareness regarding plagiarism. However it is also not as easy as simply substituting subjective questions with objective ones -- it is basically the art of designing creative questions, whether subjective or objective, that will compel students to engage in analytical or critical thinking.

Hence, we need to rid ourselves of the entire culture of question suggestions, question banks, the concept of getting "common" questions in exams, questions that can be answered directly from the text. The reality of our exam system is that questions are predictable and tutors are rated on how well they can predict the questions. Questions are meant to be



unseen in every subject. If society is focused on obtaining marks, then we need to design the exams in such a way that analytical and creative thinking is required to obtain marks.

Even in mathematics, why should the problems in the question paper be problems that are already present in the textbook? The idea of teaching math is like teaching someone to fish. If the questions comprise problems that they have already solved from the textbook, then it is analogous to catching the fish for them and feeding them for a day.

But if we teach them the techniques necessary in terms of how to solve any kind of problem and keep the questions unseen then we teach them how to fish and feed them for a lifetime. It also eliminates the possibility of memorising mathematical problems.

In fact, there is a section in the policy that mentions the ban on notes and guidebooks. Once again this is a misapprehension in terms of identification of the root problem. Guidebooks are not evil; in fact they can be very helpful in allowing students to learn techniques in solving problems they may not have understood in class, eliminating to a certain extent the need for a private tutor.

Hence, it is not guidebooks and notes that need to be banned, it is the exam system that needs to be changed by designing questions in such a manner so that students will never be able to answer by memorising from the guidebooks.

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An honest budget

SADIQ AHMED

THE budget speech started in an innovative fashion that I much appreciated. The FM explained that he would depart from the conventional approach and not read the entire long speech that was already circulated in written form to the House.

Instead, he said he would focus on the highlights and the main messages by using power point. Immediately my excitement went up. I always believe less is more and the main points tell a better story than long-winding speeches where the storyline and central messages get buried or lost in the maze of winding details.

The first phase of the FM's presentation focused on the highlights of achievements of the past year and the key features of the coming year's budget. So far, so good. But I wish the rest of the budget presentation had proceeded in the same spirit rather than the detailed description that went on for a fairly long period, punctuated by a couple of longish breaks for prayers.

What's new in the budget? I was struck by the focus of the budget on growth unlike previous years where the main emphasis was on social welfare.

My first reaction listening to the FM was that this budget certainly can be dubbed as a budget for economic growth. I say this because of the emphasis on infrastructure, especially energy, the emphasis on raising the investment rate, the emphasis on exports, and the emphasis on manufacturing sector as



the main source of additional growth and employment.

Even in agriculture, the budget de-emphasises subsidies in favour of rural infrastructure, technology, and research and extension. I think these are the right things to emphasise. The growth target in the budget, 6.7% for FY10-11, is ambitious but achievable.

In this regard, I wished the FM was gracious enough to accept the 5.54% growth rate for FY09-10 that was estimated by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), rather than project a 6% growth rate which may not have a solid basis (see Table 2).

I do not think we need to be embarrassed by the 5.54% growth rate, which is quite respectable by international standards given the global crisis.

Exports have barely grown in Bangladesh in FY09-10 that has dampened manufacturing growth. Agricultural value-added is estimated at 2.8% in this past year, which is respectable but not spectacular and much less than that achieved in FY09-10.

While remittances are buoyant and have boosted domestic demand and public expenditure is also somewhat higher than last year, it is unlikely to have supported a 6% growth in the face of the serious downturn in the expansion of exports and agriculture.

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Confessions of a development practitioner

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

YET another meeting, yet another round of completely pointless discussion. Each session sounds the same: a model project, awareness campaign, broad national agenda, working with the government -- but no funding, no project; no one at the meeting can actually guarantee any funds -- must check with supervisor to see if funds are available; but this project is crucial for further empowerment, community mobilisation, strengthening institutions... so it goes.

Same old cha-nashta. Two pathetic

pieces of apple stare at me with cheap biscuits to add to the palette. The cost-saving lemon tea gets cold while I listen to yet another soap-box monologue in a strange Bangla-English concoction, filled with clichés and development jargon.

Blankly facing the over-enthusiastic program officer from yet another terribly acronym-ed organisation, I start thinking of the e-mails I have to send, the friends I have to meet, and the groceries I have to buy.

Shahana's attention has left the meeting!

The monologue stops. Everyone is impressed because he used the terms

"strategic planning," "consultations," "stakeholder engagement," and my personal favourite, "capacity building" here and there. The last 10 minutes gave no direction, no sense of what this organisation wants, needs, and can do. Yet, they have the audacity to ask for money.

Worse yet, there are people who are even considering giving them funds!

Welcome to a typical non-profit development sector meeting, oops, sorry, "consultation" -- where nothing really gets done but people love to hear themselves talk. We use every term in development lexicon, seriously believing that verbal diarrhea will end world

poverty. An entire industry has grown out of poverty in Bangladesh, and with that, a cadre of development practitioners who have made a career out of it. I am very much a part of that cadre.

All too often, I stare at many of such soap-box preaching program officers and wonder about their paths that brought us to yet another time wasting meeting.

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