

# Joint chambers as facilitators of trade and investment

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THE term "joint chambers" generally means trade chambers involving bilateral or multi-pronged participation of countries. A joint chamber should support and strengthen business and economic cooperation between the concerned countries. This is a broad mandate, but one that befits an organisation that serves as a commercial bridge between two or more countries.

Joint chambers in general provide such services as access, business facilitation, advocacy, and professional advancement (ABFAP). Joint chambers are required to lead or receive high-level delegations, co-host events, provide public platforms for VIPs visiting from the region, go to bat for many of the members, and offer commercial services designed to help member companies win and retain business.

In broad terms, joint chambers perform a wide array of value-added services to the members which, at the end, comes down to partnerships. As they say, "one hand alone cannot clap." With this in mind, the joint chambers should extend the hand of partnership not only within the associated countries but sometimes also those outside.

There are over sixteen joint chambers in Bangladesh, which include American Chamber of Commerce

(AmCham), Canada Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CanCham), India Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, German Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, France Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Japan Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce, Korea Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry and so on.

However, while some joint chambers are playing a crucial role in augmenting the inter-trade and investment, there is growing criticism against many, because it is felt that the office-bearers of the latter group spend most of their times in purposeless luncheon or dinner meetings and pose for photographs along with foreign dignitaries just to get media publicity.

As a matter of fact, the joint chambers' primary role is supposed to be trade facilitation. They should introduce companies to opportunities, show them how to do the deal, and then get out of the way. It's dramatically different from what governments generally do. Governments promote, joint chambers facilitate.

Joint chambers may also act as unofficial envoys in furthering the cause of cooperation in trade and commerce. In order to awaken the local business community and to improve trade relations between the participating countries, joint chambers should organise

seminars and workshops, and reception to resourceful persons from within the country and outside, in cooperation with the respective high commissions/embassies in Dhaka. The prime object of all these seminars and workshops should be to create a favourable investment climate and branding Bangladesh to attract investors.

The Bangladesh economy also performed remarkably well despite the global economic crisis, and the macro-economic indicators are in good shape. This relative stability helped put Bangladesh in the limelight. Bangladesh figures in a select group of countries that have emerged from the shocks of the global economic crisis with a decidedly positive growth outlook.

Although, due to the commodity price crash, value of imports dropped slightly and capital machinery imports also declined, indicating sluggishness in the manufacturing sector investment, but the resilience of RMG and textiles sectors helped to prop up export receipts.

Besides, the key source of funds in the foreign exchange market continued to be the wage earners' remittance, which has grown at an average rate of 17% since 2001 and surged to 32%, reaching a record high of nearly \$10.72 billion in 2009. Remittances by our migrant workers contribute to 12% of the GDP, which is six times higher than the foreign development assistance and eleven times more than foreign direct investment.

The country's foreign exchange reserve crossed \$11.02 billion mark on July 8 for the first time, thanks to robust growth of inward remittance as well as gradual development in our exportable products. It is quite heartening to note that the country's export earnings are steadily coming out of a negative trend, as the export earnings

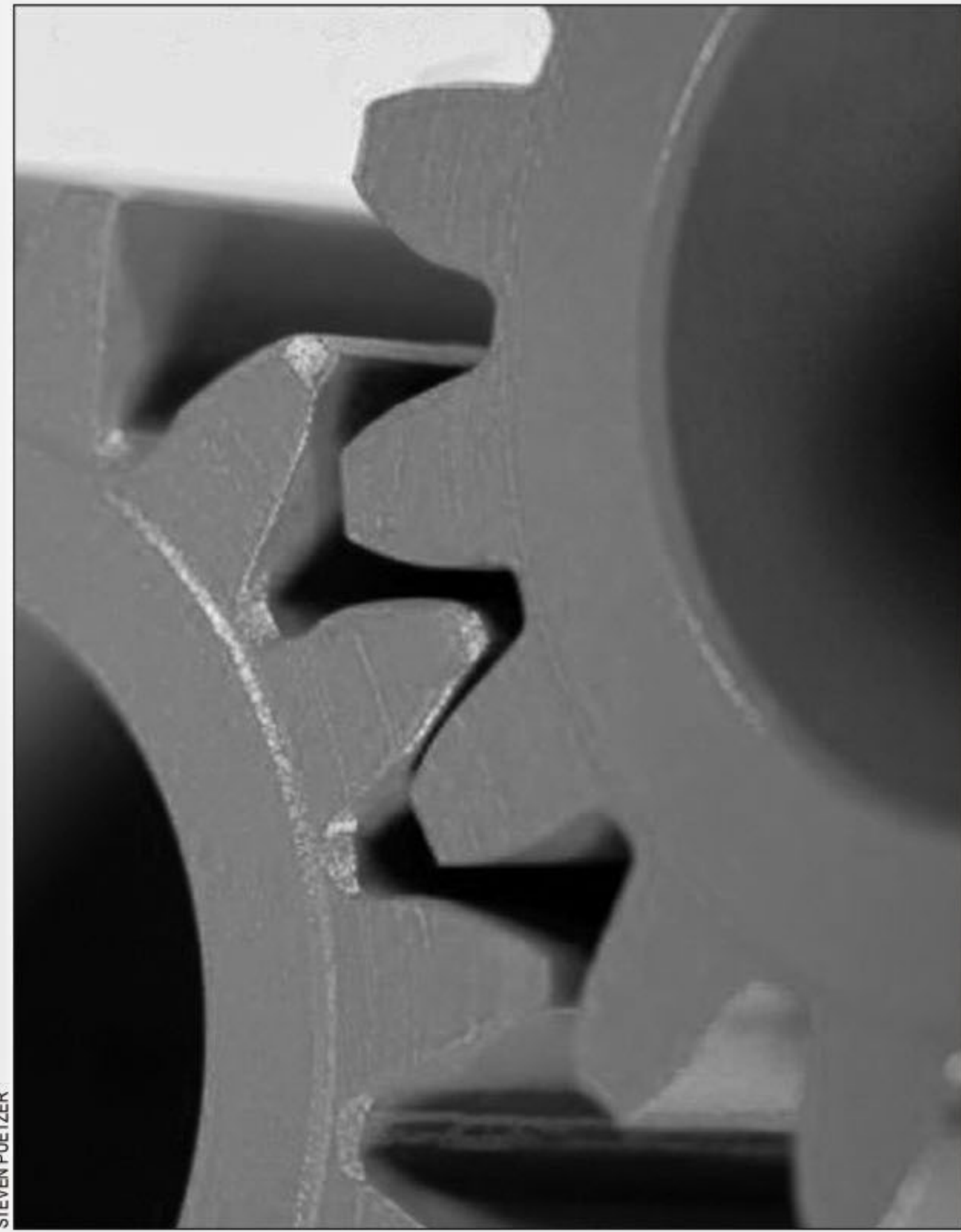
in March 2010 marked 18.38% growth compared to the same month of the previous fiscal year. According to the statistics available at the Export Promotion Bureau, the actual export earnings for the period were \$10.02 billion against the \$11.29 billion target.

The Bangladesh government has made some headway in improving the climate for foreign investors and liberalising the capital markets. Organisations such as the joint chambers have a definite role in shoring up public policy, and improving bilateral ties leading to fruitful Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

Joint chambers could be particularly effective in researching new markets for investment, leading trade delegations to meet with government and business officials, and ultimately helping businesses take full advantage of the existing opportunities. In a recent press report, it was stated that out of the 16 commercial wings of Bangladesh working abroad, only seven achieved their export targets.

I would suggest that while fixing export targets, the concerned ministry may take the respective joint chambers into confidence and arrange a review session for fixing export targets, involving representatives of concerned joint chambers and of embassies/high commissions, because such sessions could better reflect the achievable targets and play a positive role in communication with the private sectors of Bangladesh as well as those of the participating countries.

In this context, the government may come forward to help and support bona fide chambers to open separate research cells to further facilitate inter-trade between the associated countries. The prime minister recently said: "Basi-



Joint chambers are like cogs in a wheel.

cally, Bangladesh is far behind in research. It's not possible to reach the optimum level in any sector without research. We'll provide all sorts of cooperation for research."

Needless to say, to achieve the goal of Vision-2021, strategies should be

devised and action plans formulated accordingly, and the joint chambers could be effective partners in such strategies.

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# Women's food security for gender equality



Many rural women come to the cities for livelihood, but their bad luck follows them everywhere. They live inhuman lives, both in their villages and in cities, without food, shelter and other basic necessities. Where there is no money, there is no purchasing power. So we need effective and sustainable programmes to give women adequate food.

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FOOD is a basic human right. Approximately 1.5 billion people in the world live on less than \$1 a day, and every 3.6 seconds someone dies of hunger. Poverty, hunger and malnutrition silently kill the poor people and take away their ability to work and learn. So, adequate food is needed for survival, fulfilling the basic demands, ensuring constitutional human rights and achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

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If we can arrange food for all, urban migration from rural areas will become less. Poor people, especially women, need a sustainable livelihood. World

Food Day highlights awareness of the issues behind poverty and hunger. Despite the increases in food grain production, around half of the population of Bangladesh remains below the food-based poverty line.

Women are often the first to suffer malnutrition in the family. This has repercussions on their health, productivity, quality of life, and survival. Climate change will affect availability, accessibility, utilisation and systems stability of food. Bangladesh will face a major problem in the next 40 years since production of rice will decrease by at least 8% and of wheat by 32%, while the population will increase by 50-75 million.

World Food Programme (WFP) mentioned in its report of 2009 that, in Bangladesh, 46% of pregnant women, 39% of non-pregnant women, and 40% of adolescent girls, suffer from anaemia because of depleted iron stores during pregnancy and lactation, a consequence of insufficient intake of foods rich in iron and folic acid.

According to the World Bank, approx-

imately 33 million of the 150 million people in Bangladesh cannot afford an average daily intake of more than 1,800 calories, which is the minimum standard for nutrition. For the people in most developing countries, the daily calorie average is 2,828. In Bangladesh, that average is only 2,190.

Helen Keller International (HKI)-Bangladesh has been working to ensure food security and empowerment of women through different programmes. Emily Hillenbrand is a gender specialist and programme manager of HKI-Bangladesh. She said: "Gender discrimination is an underlying, structural cause of Bangladesh's alarmingly high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition. Their malnutrition is related to their limited control over economic assets, exclusion from household decisions, and restricted mobility."

I can place here a simple example of rural women's bad luck due to lack of decision-making power. A woman in Patuakhali who wanted to have her own nose-pin repaired had to ask her husband's permission and was refused, even though the wife had saved her own money for that nose-pin repairing! (Source: HKI Bulletin, No. 5, May 2010). This proves how disadvantaged and disempowered the poor women of our country are!

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) agrees that poverty is a major determinant of chronic household food insecurity. Global Hunger Index 2010 of IFPRI mentioned that malnutrition among children under two years of age is one of

the leading challenges in reducing global hunger and can cause lifelong harm to health, productivity, and earning potential.

The burden of child malnutrition could be cut by 25-36% by providing universal preventive health services and nutrition interventions for children under two and their mothers during pregnancy and lactation. The health of women, specifically mothers, is crucial to reducing child malnutrition. Mothers who were poorly nourished as girls tend to give birth to underweight babies, perpetuating the cycle of malnutrition. Nutrition interventions should be targeted towards girls and women throughout the life cycle, and especially as adolescents before they become pregnant, the report added.

Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger has been selected as the target of MDG One. It aims to:

- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day;
- Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people;
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

In fact, MDG One is related to MDG Three: To promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and MDG Five: Women's (maternal) health.

Hunger and malnutrition increase women's dependency on men and decrease their decision making power. That is why women should raise their voice to prevent discrimination and violence against them, and to be able to make their own choices/decisions like men.

Nobel Laureate of Bangladesh Dr. Muhammad Yunus said: "Economics has a relationship with peace." That means a poor economy is interlinked with poverty, and familial, social and political unrest. As a result, poverty hinders our development and economic growth, and creates obstacles on the road to achieving progress, prosperity, sustainable development, food security, adequate nutrition, gender equality, empowerment of women, peace and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

That is why we urgently need to stand up against poverty. The government, political leaders and policy makers need to be sympathetic in the real sense towards the poor and hungry; and kindly feed every hungry woman and girl an adequate diet every day. The state is committed and bound to feed the hungry at any cost.

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# 5 dumbest criminals



WHERE'S all the professionalism gone?

Screenwriters all over the world owe a debt to UK police constable Jason Mepham. He recently made a real-life arrest which makes the most far-fetched screenplay believable. Trying to nab a bad guy, PC Mepham blasted him with pepper spray -- but the wind changed and blew the stuff into the officer's own eyes. Owww!

As he staggered around blinded, another villain punched him, dislocating his jaw. Double owww! A second police officer fired his Taser to stun the villains. But he accidentally blasted PC Mepham, who collapsed. Triple owww!

One of the bad guys kicked the downed officer in the head. But the boot miraculously re-located PC Mepham's jaw. Hooray! The cops ended up arresting the villains. There has been a spate of cases around the world recently in which destiny has been on the side of the good guys: -

1. A toothless robber in Beijing tried to rob a bank to finance a new set of teeth. But Li Han, 43, couldn't make himself understood. All the teller at the bank heard was: "Umm ung umm ung umm." Li had to repeat his demands five times. By then cops had arrived.

2. A man tried to rob a bank after paying \$500 to a wizard to make him invisible. Thinking no one could see him; he strolled into a bank in Tehran and started snatching money out of

people's hands. He was astonished when angry customers wrestled him to the ground. He told police that he was the victim. "A big trick was played on me," he said.

3. A robber successfully robbed a bank in Germany. But when he noticed mistakes in the newspaper report, he complained via email to reporters and cops. Within hours, police tracked him down and arrested him.

4. A US man was given a prison sentence for driving while drunk. He went home, got blind drunk and drove himself to jail. Prison officers released the Massachusetts man, 42, so he could be taken to court and charged with a new crime.

5. A Hong Kong robber waited until he was in a bank before trying to pull a stocking over his head, former top police officer JS Lam recently revealed in his column on this page. But (as all women know) putting on stockings is a difficult job needing two hands and many years of practice. "He failed miserably, dropping his bag and toy pistol in the process," Mr. Lam said.

But there was one recent "dumb criminal" who gets sympathy from me. Mark Smith, 53, tried to rob a bank in Watsonville, California.

The bank manager urged him to take out a loan instead. Mr. Smith was filling in a large pile of forms when officers arrived to arrest him. Hang on. Most people, including me, have been trying to find places to park our meagre savings.

I went to the bank last week. Have you seen the way bankers give you zero interest on your savings, but charge a fortune for loans? The banks are the robbers. California cops: you arrested the wrong person.

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