

Government should focus on PPP to step up growth

IBA teacher says public private partnership is yet to take off

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The future of public private partnerships (PPP) in Bangladesh is similar to the country's prospects -- brimming with potential but crunching under infrastructure impasse.

Despite vivid prospects, PPP is yet to pick up fully in Bangladesh.

Syed Munir Khasru, professor of Institute of Business Administration (IBA), said this is happening because the government lacks a "time bound clear cut and well formulated" strategy to attract and execute PPP projects.

Other factors include: shortage of well-trained officials who will act as the nodal point for PPP proposals and a lack of awareness in the private sector.

"The government has good intentions, but realisation is a different thing. Nothing will happen if you sit idle with good desires," said Khasru, in an interview with The Daily Star.

The IBA professor shared his observations after his firm, e-gen Consultants Ltd, developed a PPP curriculum and training course for India that has been successful in attracting and implementing projects under PPP to develop infrastructure for its growing economy.

His is the first Bangladeshi firm to win a contract to develop the PPP curriculum to train Indian government officials, with an aim to achieve an investment of \$1 trillion through PPP for its 12th five-year plan.

"Our pride is that, as a Bangladeshi firm, we developed the PPP training curriculum and won the contract by beating Indian, American and European firms," said Khasru.



Syed Munir Khasru

Khasru said PPP strategy reflects a broad expression of good interests but there is a lot more to do to attain PPP goals.

The IBA professor said the government should focus on building the capacity of civil servants, like in India, so that they can deal with PPP proposals and support quick removal of infrastructure deficits to accelerate the pace of the economy.

"The capacity building of the government is urgently needed. The persons who will evaluate projects will have to know the evaluation process because, ultimately, the government will decide whom to award."

"Unless people have a minimum level of knowledge and understanding on how PPP projects work, and you do not develop, what will you do with the money?"

At the same time, an awareness building initiative for the private sector is also necessary. "The private sector is yet to be fully confident. They do not have the awareness, knowledge and expected desires," he said.

Khasru said an entrepreneur will be interested to know about his profit, legal obligations and rights in taking part in PPP ventures.

He said India has slowly taken confidence-building measures and successfully convinced the private sector that through PPP, they could make money from a partnership with the government.

"Until I tell that to you clearly, you will not come to me to share your money," he said.

At the same time, businessmen should change their mindset and come forward to serve the country as well as make profit.

The local firm beat globally reputed firms, such as US-based Institute of Public Private Partnership, Price Watercoopers and Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation, according to e-gen.

Khasru said the PPP curriculum will help build capacities of national, state and local Indian government officials to conceptualise, design and implement PPP projects in India.

He said the need for PPP is higher in Bangladesh than in India in the context

of huge deficits in infrastructure.

But in Bangladesh, there is a lack of trained officials in the government who will remove the bottlenecks in infrastructure by luring private sector investment under PPP.

"We simply do not have adequate well-trained officials who know how to handle (PPP proposals)," he said.

"Within the government, there is no nodal point at ministries to deal with PPP proposals. You will have to give people scope to talk with proposals."

In August, the government issued a policy strategy for PPP, focusing on 18 sectors, including exploration and production of gas, coal, oil and minerals, power generation, establishment of airports and terminals, highways and expressways and development of seaports.

Till date, private sector responses do not seem so encouraging. Since issuance of the PPP strategy, the government gave a nod to the elevated expressway proposal.

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Mumbai's washermen fear rise of the machines

AFP, Mumbai

At Mumbai's open-air Dhobi Ghat, Prem Shankar Kanojia picks up items from a pile of laundry stacked at the side of a concrete washing tank and submerges them in water murky with soap suds and grime.

Once the shirts and sheets have been soaked thoroughly, he raises each piece high above his head and smashes it down repeatedly on a large flat stone made smooth by years of pounding.

Hard-working "dhobiwallahs", or washermen, like Prem have cleaned Mumbai's clothes and bedding like this for generations, confident that the dirt and sweat of the city will provide them with a constant livelihood.

But like many in Dhobi Ghat, Prem, who followed his father into the business, a life of dunking, thrashing and drying up to 1,000 items of clothing each day for just \$7, is now not so sure.

"The problem is that we are not getting enough proper clothes because so many homes have washing machines," he told AFP.

"We don't expect enough work in the future because everyone is washing clothes at home. Where we used to get 100 clothes, now we struggle to get 10."

With its rows of tanks, flogging stones and bare-chested washermen in chequered lungis, Dhobi Ghat -- the location for a new Bollywood film of the



A washerman cleans clothes by hand at Dhobi Ghat in the Indian city of Mumbai

same name -- is an unlikely tourist attraction in India's hectic financial hub.

Mumbaikars often fail to see the curiosity in such a mundane task.

Yet every day, clean shirts and sheets of all colours can be seen billowing from the railway bridge near Mumbai racecourse -- a triumphant result of the hours of back-breaking labour.

At ground level, the 25-acre (10-hectare) ghat bustles with

activity, as fresh loads of dirty laundry are delivered through the narrow lanes of corrugated-roofed shacks by handcart or expertly balanced on heads.

Prem, whose lined face, white stubble and spindly frame make him look older than his 40 years, admitted that the job is tough, particularly when the monsoon rains arrive.

"You have to work very hard," he explained. "Everything hurts when you beat the clothes and

move your arms up and down all the time. We have to stand in the water all day for eight to 10 hours."

The chaotic activity contrasts with the electrical showroom just a short drive away, where neon lighting shows off the regimented lines of shiny chrome, grey and white washing machines on polished marble tiles.

Like many ordinary Indians who have seen their disposable

incomes rise as the country's economy expands, Fatima Safi Kabir can now afford to dispense with the services of the dhobiwallahs for good.

Washing clothes at home is not only more convenient but quicker and items are also less likely to disappear in the bundles of linen at the ghat, she says.

"If you send the clothes out to wash you have to count them, be there for the pick-up and delivery," she added. "If you're not

there, you don't get the clothes."

The increase in the market for "white goods" in India isn't the only concern of the washerfolk of Dhobi Ghat, though. Economic growth has also created more people wanting to spend their new-found cash on better places to live.

Skyscrapers now loom over Dhobi Ghat, towering half-built or nearing completion out of the matchbox tenements or "chawls" that line the busy roadside and are home to the city's poorest workers.

The luxury apartment blocks are marketed at Mumbai's increasing number of millionaires, courted by the municipal authorities and property developers.

The city's 10,000 or so dhobiwallahs -- trying to keep Mumbai's millions clean while themselves living in poverty and squalor -- wish some money could be found to improve conditions for them.

Badri Kankaiya suggested their plight is a familiar one in modern India: little or nothing changes for the millions at the bottom of the pile, whatever the rate of economic growth.

"Dhobi Ghat hasn't changed in 20 years," he said. "First it was good, now it's worse. Now everything is expensive but our work hasn't increased."

"Builders can come with their money. The rich man lives in wealth but the poor man will die poor. We only want the land, not the money. We just want to stay here and work hard."

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