

Exercising right to information

Teething problem stretching too long

EVEN after a little more than four years since the eagerly awaited RTI Act came into being, its implementation has remained sluggish. The exercise of the right by the citizens and the compliance status as far as most government and non-government authorities are concerned leave much to be desired.

Professionals point out that the demand for information is miniscule because there is hardly any awareness of the benefits that RTI Act can deliver to the users. The Stakeholders Perception Survey 2013 on Information Commission Bangladesh reveals the weak areas. Awareness will have to be raised around three major shortcomings at the potential user level: 1) A vast majority will have to be made aware of the existence of the Act and what it offers through a countrywide popularisation campaign. 2) They are to be acquainted with procedures for seeking the information like filling in prescribed forms. 3) Informal way of gathering information needs to be discouraged since records are key to enforcing compliance.

At the level of information givers, there should be exclusive designated points in every office and institution to furnish information in terms of the Act.

The need for breaking mental barriers both at the level of information-seekers and disseminators is great. This requires modifying archaic laws like the Official Secrets Act 1923, penalisation for non-compliance with a legitimate request for information have to be stringent. Decentralisation of the Information Commission down to division level has been suggested but it should not be mere addition of a structure without well-defined field of competence.

Papering over brick kilns

It is proving costly

LAST week, this paper reported that brick kilns are causing environmental and agricultural damage in Lalmonirhat district. The agricultural output has gone down almost 50% because the farmlands were converted into brick kilns. The smoke from the outfits is causing health and environmental damages in the areas around them.

The sad truth is, it is not just in Lalmonirhat, brick kilns are growing around the country and causing similar damages. There are brick kilns near the protected areas causing a decline in biodiversity and impinging on the rights of the local nature-dependent communities. These private businesses are in breach of the Department of Environment's (DOE) policies and laws. Something DOE officials need to take a closer look into.

One may argue, these brick kilns are providing employment to the locals but in the long run increasing the production of bricks as opposed to agricultural products can only leave our country with a lot of brick sandwiches, absolutely inedible.

To provide for expanding constructions in and around cities, the brick kilns are growing fast. The bricks are building homes for you and me. But this environmentally and agriculturally unsustainable measure can only bring more negative impacts. DOE must take steps, and brick kiln owners need to find areas more suitable and not take away production of essentials, leaving the country in avoidable peril.

Investment and the lesser-known ratio

FAARIA TASIN

WITH the political strife out of the way, the investment climate can finally provide the much needed sustenance for businesses to bloom. As the country has surpassed half of the fiscal year, speculations regarding the economic growth rate are rife in an array of institutions; most of the forecasts puts the growth rate to hover somewhere close to 6%, which of course is much lower than the target of 7.2%.

An argument had been made in the past, and has come up again after the announcement of the current monetary policy statement, that one of the main reasons for slower economic growth and low investment is the 'contractionary' monetary policy. However, this concept has been nullified after the incidents of fiscal 10 and 11 which proved that quantitative easing in the face of limited infrastructure and energy would lead to asset bubbles.

As we have seen, political instability, along with inadequate infrastructure and energy, will also pull investment downwards. The rate at which private sector takes loans had been 17.4% in November 2012 and tumbled to 11.1% in November 2013, depicting the toll political turmoil can take on investment.

But how much investment would be required to generate a growth rate of 7% or 8%? This is where the Incremental Capital-Output Ratio (ICOR) comes in. The lower the ICOR of a country, the higher is the productivity of capital, and vice-versa. For Bangladesh, the ICOR is around 4, which simply depicts that to increase growth rate by 1 percentage point, rise in investment rate by 4 percentage points is required. For a country which has an ICOR of 3 implies greater productivity as an additional percentage point of growth rate can be achieved by increasing the investment rate by only 3 percentage points.

The ICOR can also help to give us an insight on how much investment needs to be in order to achieve a desired growth rate. For instance, if Bangladesh wants to achieve a growth rate of 8%, with an ICOR of 4, the investment rate needs to be 32%. This, however, doesn't necessarily mean that it can happen in the short-term. A leap in investment needs to be absorbed properly by the country and cannot happen overnight. For proper absorption, investment level needs to be ramped up gradually in the next few years. This starts primarily by ensuring political stability and getting rid of energy and infrastructure bottlenecks.

The writer is the head of research at The Daily Star and can be reached at faaria.ts@gmail.com

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

One would be factual in commenting that the Western media often give the impression that the embattled and occasionally violent form of religiosity known as 'fundamentalism' is a purely Islamic phenomenon. This is not the reality. Fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to issues and problems of modernity. There is fundamentalist Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity, fundamentalist Hinduism, fundamentalist Buddhism, fundamentalist Sikhism, and even fundamentalist Confucianism.

Historical experience shows that fundamentalism takes shape when modernisation process acquires a faster pace. During such process there are often efforts by religious people to reform traditions and effect a meeting between traditions and modern culture. However, when moderate measures are found to be of no avail, some people resort to more extreme methods, and a fundamentalist movement is born. In fact, fundamentalism was quite well established among Christians and Jews, who had had a comparatively longer exposure to the modern experience.

It would thus not be out of place and context to say that fundamentalism is an essential part of the modern scene. Fundamentalists will often register their protest and discontent with a modern development by overstressing those elements in their tradition that militate against it. Even in the United States the fundamentalists are highly critical of democracy and secularism. The fundamentalist movement strongly believes that the secular establishment is determined to wipe religion out. Such reaction is, however, not always paranoid. Experience shows that secularism has often been very aggressive in the Muslim world.

Interestingly, since the emancipation of women has been one of the hallmarks of modern culture, fundamentalists tend to emphasise conventional, agrarian gender roles, putting women back into veils and into the home. The fundamentalist advocates can thus be seen as the shadow-side of modernity. Curiously, they can also highlight some of the darker sides of the modern experiment. They also feel assaulted by the liberal or modernising establishment and as a result their views and behaviour become more extreme.

Looking back one would find that in the United States when the Protestant fundamentalists tried to prevent the teaching of evolution in the public schools, they were so ridiculed by the secularist press that their theology became

Historical experience shows that fundamentalism takes shape when modernisation process acquires a faster pace. During such process there are often efforts by religious people to reform traditions and effect a meeting between traditions and modern culture.

Fundamentalism

TH E word 'fundamentalism' has often been used and expressed in a pejorative sense. For facility of understanding can we term the embattled and frequently intolerant religiosity as fundamentalism? Are the so-called fundamentalists departing from the core values of compassion, justice and benevolence that characterise all the world faiths, including Islam? One could raise such a query as the myth of the supposed fanatical intolerance of Islam has become one of the accusatory ideas of the West.

more reactionary and excessively literal, and they turned from the left to the extreme right of the political spectrum. Thus when secularist attack has been violent, the fundamentalist reaction is likely to be even greater. Fundamentalism thus begins as an internal dispute with liberals or secularists within one's own culture or nation.

Fundamentalists feel that they are fighting for survival and that they have to fight their way out of the impasse. In this frame of mind some fundamentalists resort to terrorism. The vast majority, however, try to revive their faith in a more conventional, lawful way. Muslims can rightly object to the use of the term 'fundamentalism' because it was coined by American Protestants as a badge of pride. Religious Muslims, however, share their profound misgivings about modern secular culture. It needs to be noted that 'usul' for Muslim refers to the fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and all Muslims could be said to subscribe to 'usuliyah' (fundamentalism).

Fundamentalists appear to be successful in pushing religion from sidelines and back to centre stage and thus it now plays a major part in international affairs once again. It cannot be branded simply as a way of using religion for a political end. It is rebellion against the secularist exclusion of the divine from public life, and to make spiritual values prevail in the modern world. However, the desperation and fear of the fundamentalists tend to distort the religious tradition, and highlight its more aggressive aspects at the expense of those that preach toleration and reconciliation.

In the Indian subcontinent Maulana Moududi was one of the early fundamentalist ideologues. He defied the whole secularist ethos and his Islamic liberation theology dictated that as God alone was sovereign, nobody was obliged to take orders from any other human being. To him revolution against the colonial powers was not just a right but a duty. The stress and

fear of cultural and religious annihilation had led to the development of a more extreme and potentially violent distortion of faith.

The real founder of the so-called Islamic fundamentalism in the Sunni world was Sayyid Qutb of Egypt who became convinced that religious people and secularists could not live in peace in the same society. His espousal of a form of Islam distorted both the message of the Quran and the Prophet's life because the Prophet achieved victory by an ingenious policy of non-violence. The Quran adamantly opposes force and coercion in religious matters and its vision is manifestly tolerant and inclusive, and thus, far from exclusion and separation. Some Muslim fundamentalists, in their struggle to survive, make religion a tool of oppression and even of violence.

A vested quarter in the West had developed a stereotypical and distorted image of Islam, which they regard as the enemy of decent civilisation. The scholar monks of Europe had purposely depicted Islam as an inherently violent and intolerant faith. One needs to recognise that secular aggression and persecution can be just as violent as religion.

Islam has always kept the notions of social justice, equality, tolerance and practical compassion in the forefront of the Muslim conscience for centuries. Muslims may have at times faltered in internalising those ideals in their social and political institutions. However, to cultivate a distorted image of Islam would be a catastrophe.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Stagnation by design

BUSINESS & FINANCE



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

economist Larry Summers, is warning of secular stagnation.

The basic point that I raised a half-decade ago was that, in a fundamental sense, the US economy was sick even before the crisis: it was only an asset-price bubble, created through lax regulation and low interest rates, that had made the economy seem robust. Beneath the surface, numerous problems were festering: growing inequality; an unmet need for structural reform (moving from a manufacturing-based economy to services and adapting to changing global comparative advantages); persistent global imbalances; and a financial system more attuned to speculating than to making investments that would create jobs, increase productivity, and redeploy surpluses to maximise social returns.

Policy makers' response to the crisis failed to address these issues; worse, it exacerbated some of them and created new ones -- and not just in the US. The result has been increased indebtedness in many countries, as the collapse of GDP undermined government revenues. Moreover, underinvestment in both the public and private sector has created a generation of young people who have spent years idle and increasingly alienated at a point in their lives when they should have been honing their skills and increasing their productivity.

On both sides of the Atlantic, GDP is likely to grow considerably faster this year than in 2013. But, before leaders who embraced austerity policies open the champagne and toast themselves, they should examine where we are and consider the near-irreparable damage that these policies have caused.

Every downturn eventually comes to an end. The mark of a good policy is that it succeeds in making the downturn shallower and shorter than it otherwise would have been. The mark of the austerity policies that many governments embraced is that they made the downturn far deeper and longer than was necessary, with long-lasting consequences.

Real (inflation-adjusted) GDP per capita is lower in most of the North Atlantic than it was in 2007; in Greece, the economy has shrunk by an estimated 23%. Germany, the top-performing European country, has recorded miserly 0.7% average annual growth over the last six years. The US economy is still roughly 15% smaller than it would have been had growth continued even on the moderate

pre-crisis trajectory.

But even these numbers do not tell the full story of how bad things are, because GDP is not a good measure of success. Far more relevant is what is happening to household incomes. Median real income in the US is below its level in 1989, a quarter-century ago; median income for full-time male workers is lower now than it was more than 40 years ago.

Some, like the economist Robert Gordon, have suggested that we should adjust to a new reality in which long-term productivity growth will be significantly below what it has been over the past century. Given economists' miserable record -- reflected in the run-up to the crisis -- for even three-year predictions, no one should have much confidence in a crystal ball that forecasts decades into the future. But this much seems clear: unless government policies change, we are in for a long period of disappointment.

Markets are not self-correcting. The underlying fundamental problems that I outlined earlier could get worse -- and many are. Inequality leads to weak demand; widening inequality weakens demand even more; and, in most countries, including the US, the crisis has only worsened inequality.

The trade surpluses of northern Europe have increased, even as China's have moderated. Most important, markets have never been very good at achieving structural transformations quickly on their own; the transition from agriculture to manufacturing, for example, was anything but smooth; on the contrary, it was accompanied by significant social dislocation and the Great Depression.

This time is no different, but in some ways it could be worse: the sectors that should be growing, reflecting the needs and desires of citizens, are services like education and health, which traditionally have been publicly financed, and for good reason. But, rather than government facilitating the transition, austerity is inhibiting it.

Malaise is better than a recession, and a recession is better than a depression. But the difficulties that we are facing now are not the result of the inexorable laws of economics, to which we simply must adjust, as we would to a natural disaster, like an earthquake or tsunami. They are not even a kind of penance that we have to pay for past sins -- though, to be sure, the neoliberal policies that have prevailed for the past three decades have much to do with our current predicament.

Instead, our current difficulties are the result of flawed policies. There are alternatives. But we will not find them in the self-satisfied complacency of the elites, whose incomes and stock portfolios are once again soaring. Only some people, it seems, must adjust to a permanently lower standard of living. Unfortunately, those people happen to be most people.

The writer, a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book is *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2014. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

What BNP and AL should do

The BNP should say "No" to Jamaat (a party of war criminals) and the Awami League should say "No" to the Jatiya Party (Ershad is the godfather of corruption, he sowed the seed of money making culture in politics). Both parties should clear up the messes they made, do soul-searching and listen to the commoners.

Rubab Abdullah (Shukla)
Residential Area
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Traffic jam in Chittagong

These days traffic jam has become a daily affair in some streets of Chittagong. Every morning as I travel through the road from New Market to Karnaphuli bridge, I have to face severe gridlock on the way. Traveling by a 'tempo' is a hazardous proposition as you have to crouch for a long time. A bridge is under construction on the Syed Ashraf Ali road and so the commuters have to travel by an alternative route through the Fishery Ghat area. As morning is the time for fish trade, we have to face traffic congestion while crossing that area.

We hope the authorities will do something to alleviate the suffering of the commuters.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Education, casualty of violent politics

I had been planning to go to Dhaka since long but due to the political situation, my wish couldn't be fulfilled. It became a common practice for the political activists to throw explosives like cocktail and petrol bomb at buses and other public transports, which claimed many innocent lives in the recent past.

Political turmoil had bad impact on educational institutions also. Schools remained closed and students were deprived of education. O level and A level examinations were rescheduled and candidates had to sit for their exams at midnight. This violent practice must stop.

Nahiat Imtiaz
Anandaniketan School
Sylhet

Comments on news report, "Contractor delays 4-lane project," February 05, 2014

OpeeMonir

Once again, a clear indication of how corruption is taking place around us in broad daylight. We do not need any definition for it, dear minister Obaidul Quader. It is an important project which has direct contribution to our GDP and yet the government is telling us story. We need immediate action and progress on the project as it has impacts on our daily life. If necessary, army's help can be sought.

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Before accusing the BNP of indulging in corruption, this government should take a close look at itself. Surely these foreign companies will not be able to do whatever they want if they do not receive the backing of those close to the government high-ups.

Sanjoy Goswami

The Chinese company must be blacklisted if it does not conform to the terms and conditions of the contract. Having done so, the government should start the process of re-tendering.

"Muhith irked by slow progress" (February 04, 2014)

Sara

Besides the electricity problem, transportation is the worst, especially in Dhaka, with its almost permanently clogged streets commuting in Dhaka becomes almost impossible. Therefore, transportation system of Dhaka needs to be improved through different means, for example, introduction of flyovers, elevated expressways, metro rails, etc.

Recently the PM agreed to handle certain projects personally. The above projects could benefit from such supervision...

Barkat

This FM is ready to blame anyone and everyone except himself. He is irked by slow growth, but the nation is irked by him, a totally undemocratic and unelected leader.

"'Killer force' in action" (February 05, 2014)

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

How these politicians love to talk! Where is her proof and most importantly, who is the source that provided these figures: the people who claimed that over two thousand Hefazat men were killed last May?

Thunder Voice

Don't you worry, "pride will have a fall"