

"We hope that we will be able to help Bangladesh realise its full potential."

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, Robert D. Watkins, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Bangladesh talks to Amitava Kar about some development ideas for Bangladesh.

How do we make development sustainable without changing consumer behaviour? For instance, deforestation is a serious issue but people need land for agriculture, housing, etc.

I don't have all the answers and the question has many different aspects.

There's wastage of food and produce in Bangladesh as in many other countries. Arable land is decreasing due to climate change and unregulated urbanisation. Resources need to be managed more rationally. We have to increase tax incentives for people to invest in ways that recognise the value of land, in the value of agricultural produce. Food producers need to be rewarded in ways that it remains attractive for them to keep living on the land and keep producing food. It's a great achievement that Bangladesh can say that it's self-sufficient in rice. But man does not live on rice alone. That's where Bangladesh has challenges trying to get all those complimentary foods.

Similarly, when looking at buildings in the cities, there are regulations and norms for building codes but there is a problem in enforcement. It's basically a question of poverty at the end of the day. In the meantime, people try to find shortcuts.

Bangladesh has taken an impressive number of steps in terms of preparing for the effects of climate change. The number of deaths from cyclones and other storms, for instance, has greatly diminished over time. But that's dealing with the consequences. Bangladesh needs to be doing more in adaptation programmes. That means things like planning the location of villages more properly, managing rivers through dredging or tidal river management (TRM), investing in aquaculture and so on.

Have you visited a lot of projects in other districts?

I have been here just over four months now. Recently I visited some UNDP projects in Southwest Khulna and Satkhira, and I saw families who had to relocate their homes more than three or four times because of rising waters, changing course of rivers, floods



Robert D. Watkins

from cyclones and so on. My first visit was to Cox's Bazaar to look at the refugee camps and the informal settlements of undocumented Myanmar nationals. Government estimates put the number between 300,000 and 500,000 and it has had a huge impact on the rural economy of the Cox's Bazaar area which is already an impoverished part of the country. The UN agencies and IOM have several programmes there to help both foreigners and Bangladeshis.

Is UNDP looking into how Bangladesh can make better use of its ocean resources?

We are in discussions with the government to talk about developing what's known as the "blue economy". Bangladesh needs to broaden its industrial base beyond RMG and telecoms of the country need to move beyond its present 6 percent growth rate—which is very positive—and create a healthier economic base. But the country requires

better education, skills, infrastructure, and investment.

That's why the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are so important for Bangladesh compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDGs focused on reducing poverty, getting more children in primary and secondary education as well as having a gender balance. Bangladesh has been very successful at that. SDGs will be more numerous, better adapted to Bangladesh's particular challenges, and focusing much more on the qualitative aspects.

How do we ensure quality in education?

It has to be identified as a priority which means it gets a greater percentage of the country's budget. With Official Development Assistance (ODA) likely to decrease over the coming years, the country is going to have to find alternative sources of funding. The country has to expand its tax base. It also

means harnessing the private sector and getting it to invest more. I have seen this in other countries where, for instance, the private sector has established universities or technology training centres for the industries they want to develop.

How did Bangladesh do in reaching the MDGs?

I have mentioned primary and secondary school enrollment and getting more girls into the education system. There has also been a decrease in child mortality. Bangladesh has become a model in poverty reduction. Where it has been less successful is in areas like maternal healthcare. Environmental pollution continues to plague the country, in the air and the waterways. Excessive use of pesticides remains a big issue in agriculture which also impacts the environment.

It needs to do more also in the area of tuberculosis. In Bangladesh, more than 50 percent of people who contract TB are not detected. However, on the positive side, when they are detected the successful treatment rate is very high, about 93 percent, which is one of the best in the world after China and Cambodia.

What kind of challenges does the UNDP face in performing its task on a day-to-day basis?

It's a difficult question.

Look, for instance, at SDGs. They will have a greater emphasis on quality. That means in order to be able to report on improvements, the quality of statistics needs to be greatly improved. We have 17 goals and 169 targets right now - of course, the whole process has not been completed yet. The process will be finalised sometime in September at the UN General Assembly. But in order to be able to follow, monitor, and actually report on all of the goals, whether it's 169 or 180, it's going to require a reliable and well-developed database which right now is deficient.

Bangladesh has a lot to be proud of in terms of its achievements since its independence in 1971. Now that we are

entering into the SDG period, Bangladesh is well poised to make a qualitative leap in terms of the improvements made. It's going to require a common vision and well-thought out strategy. The UN has been working in Bangladesh since independence and we hope that we will be able to help the country realise its full potential.

Could you please tell us about the process that went into defining these 169 targets?

It was long and complex. In 2010, there were discussions about putting in place a process that would help the UN member states come up with a new agenda to replace the MDGs when they ended in 2015. One of the main distinctions between the MDGs and SDGs lies in their approach. The MDGs were very much developed by governments in collaboration with the UN for the developing countries, whereas the SDGs are the culmination of a process of consultation not just with governments but with a huge number of people around the world from civil society, including academia, media, faith-based groups, and the private sector. In 2012, at the Rio+20 summit, governments came together to talk about what would be some of the most important issues on the post-MDG goals.

And these goals are universal - each of the 193 member states will have to adopt them. Each country will have its own set of SDGs based on its needs. They will cover new areas such as the environment, energy and governance.

Financing them will be a challenge. That's why conferences such as the South-South and Triangular Cooperation held recently in Dhaka were so important. With the 22 treaties signed between Bangladesh and India, we hope that there will be much more transfer of technology and know-how between the two countries. Bangladesh has a lot to offer to other developing countries. For instance, the country has had tremendous success in digitalisation and e-government, and poverty reduction which we hope can be replicated in other countries.

EDUCATION: NOT A COMMODITY



FINANCE Minister Abdul Muhith desperately wants to break out of the six percent growth trap and he seems to believe that this can be done with a larger budget. It must be noted though that in the last few years, he

tried to do the same but the growth performance failed to match that of the previous years. In the new fiscal year, expenditure will rise to Tk 2.95 trillion; it will largely be funded by new taxes and social spending cuts which will no doubt affect the livelihood of the working class. On the contrary, there will be corporate tax cuts that will not only help attract foreign investment and prop up big businesses but also fatten the wallets of the wealthy. That's the revolutionary idea of "social justice" behind the new budget.

Our lawmakers' vision of the future seems to revolve heavily around bringing in foreign money and enabling a system that profits off of the proletariat rather than building a capable workforce while ensuring that our children have an affordable education. How else would you explain the budgetary allocations for FY2015-16?

The allocation for the education and technology sectors dropped by 1.5 percent in the recent budget proposal -- from 13.1 percent of the budget in the last fiscal year to 11.6 percent this year. The allocation to the science and technology ministry decreased by nearly a whopping Tk 10 billion from the last fiscal year. So much for all this talk (more like

demagoguery) about reforming the education system, boosting literacy rates, creating an environment of innovation, and producing high-skilled workers! If we are to go by the recent budgetary allocations, it looks like a whole new ball game. Despite so much having been written about the "window of opportunity" that is our demographic dividend and the increasing proportion of the working age population (a huge chunk of which remains illiterate), lawmakers seem least concerned about forming a capable and skilled workforce.

In the budget proposal of FY2015-16, a staggering 10 percent VAT was imposed on private universities, medical and engineering colleges, for the first time ever. Following a request by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, it was reduced to a "lenient" 7.5 percent.

Students of several private universities have begun to protest the move under the banner "No VAT" and are demanding a withdrawal of the ludicrous tax imposition.

Do our politicians and lawmakers think they're doing a favour by giving us the "option" of studying in a private institution? What they seem to be forgetting is that it is they who have been entrusted with the duty to serve our interests in the best way possible; for instance, why not enforce a tuition "ceiling", if you will, to ensure that the average student can afford a decent education? One of the reasons why private universities were established in the first place is because of the limitations of public universities that neither have the infrastructure nor the capacity to accommodate every student. In a highly unequal social structure as ours, when it comes to private universities, those belonging to the middle and lower class are struggling to pay exorbitant tuition fees. If anything,

lawmakers are doing us a disservice in the name of preserving our interests.

What is particularly disturbing, however, is the treatment of education as a commodity. Unlike a pack of cigarettes or a restaurant meal that incurs a VAT fee, the right to education is a basic human right and not something to be capitalised on. Private universities are netting huge gains as it is, and imposing a VAT on students only serves to overburden the latter financially when most of them are already paying through the nose. A VAT not only legitimises the commoditisation of education, a universal right, but also further marginalises those who can only dream of affording an education.

Low consumer awareness along with a lack of functional information on VAT makes the situation even more complex, making it easier for the tax system to spread its tentacles, as far as into the realm of education.

If the government wants us to take their word for all that they say they'll deliver, they must not only act on their promises but also produce authentic, visible results instead of doing the opposite of what they say they'll do. Projects with fancy, ambitious titles and allocations of large sums of funds to MPs are almost never followed up and the people want transparency for a change. We want a clear breakdown of exactly how these hefty sums of taxpayers' money will be spent on said projects and their ensuing progress. The public ought to know how the proposed Tk 145.02 billion for the primary and mass education ministry and Tk 171.12 billion for the education ministry in the new budget will be spent.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid had said earlier this year that steps would be taken to stem the trend of profit-making by educational institutions. Fast forward six



months, the government serves us with a proposal that increases tuition fees instead, going on to do the very thing they had assured us they would "take steps" against. This is a manifestation of the many ways in which political organisations and higher-education institutions are in cahoots with each other.

The new budget is indicative of a lack of prioritisation of people's welfare on the part of lawmakers. Slashing funds for the health and education sectors, which rank towards the bottom in terms of budget allocation, is extremely concerning. I am not sure whether the prospect of Bangladesh achieving the middle income goal by 2021 based on the labour of the low-skilled and a widening

wealth gap is what we need or want. What we need is an educated, high-skilled workforce. Period.

Such regressive forms of taxation on education intensify austerity measures on the working class and echo the dangerous capitalist ideals that have seeped into knowledge production. Our lawmakers need to rid themselves of the "get the maximum and give the minimum" attitude and policies, especially towards institutions which were built upon the ideals of harnessing knowledge and building cultural and political understanding that transcends race, gender, nationality and religion.

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.



Quotable Quote



DORIS LESSING

Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so.

