

# Comprehensive approach needed to address disability issues

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BANGLADESH has ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Moreover, pursuant to constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in Article 28 of the Bangladesh Constitution, specific laws have been passed to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. Despite these constitutional protections, nearly one million people with disabilities in Bangladesh are suffering from limited employment and educational opportunities, social discrimination and stigma.

## NOT JUST A MEDICAL ISSUE

The situation in Bangladesh is compounded by inadequate financial support, insufficient services, a limited number of trained professionals, and fragmented policies and procedures. Without a comprehensive government-monitored programme to address these issues, those with disabilities and special needs cannot hope to become active participating members of society.

South-East Asian countries share similar social and cultural beliefs: college education is highly valued, families are close-knit and interdependent, and social structures are more intricate than in western societies. This can be both a source of support and a cause of greater complexity. Unfortunately, what often happens for many with complex genetic conditions, such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), is that fear, misunderstanding and lack of information lead to social isolation and economic hardship.

Families with disabled children often experience insensitive remarks, discrimination and humiliation. In Bangladesh, parents of children with special needs live in a culture within a culture where sometimes even the extended family does not interact in a positive and supportive manner. Parents, particularly mothers, are often blamed and shunned, and sometimes even abandoned, for having a child with a disability. The lack of understanding, coupled with the condemnation and personal guilt that parents are made to experience, is outrageous and appalling. In South-East Asia disability is not just a medical issue; it is a human rights issue.

## ADVANCES MADE

Despite our many social, economic, political and environmental challenges, we have made tremendous progress in bringing the issue of disability to the forefront. Through the Global Autism Public Health Initiative launched in 2011, we have significantly addressed our primary challenge, social stigma, which permeates all aspects of our society. Using the platform of a complex neurodevelopmental disorder like autism, we have adopted a unique approach to addressing our needs.

We have created a National Steering Committee for Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Autism comprised

of eight relevant ministries which have developed convergent and strategic action plans based on their existing budgets and scope of services. This committee is guided by The National Advisory and a Technical Guidance Committee composed of both parents and experts. Two specific legislations have been enacted in this regard in recent years: the National Trust Act for Neurodevelopmental Disabilities 2013 and Disabled Persons Right and Security Act 2013.

## WORK AHEAD

Although two national level survey projects have been conducted, one being a door to door survey for all disabilities conducted by Ministry of Social Welfare and the second being, a pilot screening project for developmental



disorders in children through the community health clinics, we have yet to conduct a comprehensive nationwide epidemiological study that would accurately portray the number of children and adults with debilitating neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism.

We need to develop a cohesive and reliable educational classification system for special needs, adequately monitor services and programmes, develop standards and goals, and also set up a system of ongoing training for professionals serving this population. In many towns and villages, treatments offered by traditional healers are still often seen as the only option for a child with mental health or developmental issues. As a result, access to appropriate and necessary medical care and early interventions, which are absolutely critical in reducing the impact on critical developmental milestones, is severely limited.

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

In order to fully address the needs of those with disabilities (especially complex ones like mental health conditions and neurodevelopmental disorders), our approach has to be multi-faceted, comprehensive and integrated within other community based programmes, whether they are health, social support, educational, or financial. The aim of such an approach would be to formulate programmes and services that enable persons with disabilities to access medical, educational and employment opportunities throughout their entire life.

The salient features of such an approach should include:

a) Interventions: Interventions which are not only

reversed.

c) Awareness and Education: More action to urgently remove the stigma that is associated with disabilities, particularly for mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders. Conducting targeted awareness campaigns that focus on not just removing myths and prejudices but actually help inform the lay person about scientific information. Educating the general public, professionals and decision makers, by disseminating information that contains research based information and challenges the many myths that exist about disabilities.

d) Training of Professionals: Enhancing knowledge base and skill levels of professionals working in not just the disability sector but also in the health, education and labour sector, including disability specific content in the curriculum of doctors and allied health professionals, teachers and school administrators, as well as social support workers. This is particularly necessary for mental health and developmental disabilities such as autism. Investing in research and training of clinical professionals in the latest diagnostic and treatment tools.

e) Laws, Policies and Programmes: Creating new legislation, policies, programmes and procedures which are culturally sensitive, economically feasible and ensure that the human rights of those with ASD are promoted, protected and realised. They must be based on scientific evidence, be supportive of families and enable inclusion in all aspects of society, and incorporate disability specific issues in all existing development programmes so that they may be feasible and sustainable by governments, and have the opportunity to grow further.

## CONCLUSION

In addition to the immeasurable burden experienced by the individuals concerned and their families, the economic hardship associated with dealing with these issues can be particularly profound in countries with limited financial resources, such as Bangladesh. The only way that the needs of those with special needs will be adequately addressed is if policy makers, government bodies, professional organisations and parents work together in partnership. The ultimate goal of all efforts whether taken at the national or community level should be to ensure that those with disabilities have a say in the decision making process and that they can be fully included in all aspects of society.

Only through regional collaborations between organisations and political leaders can those with special needs hope to become independent and productive members of society. International organisations, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, also need to urgently take greater measures to address the needs of children with special needs and their families.

The writer is Chairperson, National Advisory Committee on Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, Bangladesh and Member, Expert Advisory Panel on Mental Health, World Health Organization.

## EXPORT DIVERSIFICATION IN BANGLADESH

# WHERE'S THE PROBLEM?

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THERE is a saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" Do we as a nation suffer from the same mindset? I am talking about the total dependence of the country on one group of commodities for its exports. Over the last two decades, we have successfully realigned our focus from one primary exports, jute and jute goods, to another, readymade garments (RMG) which generates more than three-quarters of our export earnings. While experts recommend that we diversify and the government pays lip service to this desirable goal from time to time, nothing changes. Collectively, we seem to be following the age-old advice, "Let us make some hay while the sun is shining."

Now let me juxtapose our situation to that of a middle-eastern oil-rich sheikhdom of the seventies. They discover oil and become an oil-exporting country. But, do they need to worry about being over-dependent on oil revenues? You bet! In this context, I hardly need to bring into the discussion the roller coaster ride that the oil market is going through now, and how countries such as Russia, Venezuela, and Nigeria are coping with this external shock as investment funds dry up, joblessness skyrockets, and the economy goes through the shivers. We do not want Bangladesh to face this scenario with its "business as usual" mentality.

Admittedly, Bangladesh does have a fairly

well-diversified portfolio of exports including garments, leather products, pharmaceuticals, agricultural products, IT support, etc. However, over the last ten years we have become more and more dependent on garments products. In other words our industrial base and exports are concentrated on four items: garments, jute, leather, and plastics. Using the data provided on Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) website, more than 81 percent of our export earnings come from

What is wrong with this scenario? I've heard the argument, often at international conferences, that since we are doing so well in the RMG exports market, and may even reach the \$50 billion level in the not too distant future, why do anything different? In other words, the system is not broken, and we are doing well in the exports market, so why try to change anything?

First of all, the overdependence, or lack of diversity, carries with it some very real risks for our GDP and employment growth. The

enforcement of fire, safety, and regulations mean that we can currently outbid most of our competitors, such as Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India. However, as can be seen from the history of the last few years, wind directions can change and so can the sentiment and market conditions in the West. Notwithstanding the oversight exercised by Accord and Alliance, Bangladesh may soon find itself losing market share as trade alliances and tariff preferences shift. The cost of labour is increasing, and will increase further as the living wage movement gains ground. Compliance with fire and safety codes also will raise the cost of production. Current trade negotiations, particularly the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement has some strict guidelines on environmental and labour laws, which is likely to adversely affect us since Vietnam is joining TPP and will cut into our market share in the USA, Japan, and Canada.

Secondly, trade relations can be a source of growth but data shows that our current export-import mix leaves us at a disadvantageous position with our trading partners. Our terms of trade, i.e. the value of our exports relative to our imports, are declining. There are many factors that might be causing this decline, our export of low value, labour-intensive products and import of highly priced items such as petroleum, cotton, machinery, and iron and steel, is a major driver of the measured adverse terms of trade.

Finally, recent economic research based on empirical evidence shows that export diversi-

fication promotes economic growth. The experiences of China, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam show that as countries transition from labour-intensive mono-culture to an economy based on capital and high-skilled industries, the investment rate and employment growth takes off. One study by Harvard economist Dani Rodrik found that export concentration, similar to what we notice in Bangladesh, is detrimental to growth in per capita income.

Therefore, as we look into the future, our leaders both in the political and business sectors need to pay more serious attention to an alternative development strategy that encourages and supports diversification of exports, both in terms of products and destination. Recent initiatives to promote thrust sectors including agro-products, plastics, leather, pharmaceuticals, software and ICT, home textiles, ocean-going shipbuilding, furniture, terry towel, and tourism are moving in the right direction. Our efforts to solve infrastructure, power, and institutional bottlenecks need to be followed through. And finally, a comprehensive policy package which provides improved climate for foreign investment, supportive governmental policies and incentives, during the process of "cost discovery" as new entrepreneurs find their footing, and retrofit foreign technology for domestic adoption, will help in creating a new dynamic tier of export industries.

The writer is an economist and writes on policy issues.

*One doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to be aware of the dangers of over-reliance on RMG as our primary foreign exchange-earner. External shocks, be it in the form of reduced demand, higher price of cotton imports, or higher tariff in Europe, can have a major impact on the garments industry.*

RMG. According to the same website, a few items, most notably shirts, trousers, jackets, t-shirts, and sweaters account for more than 80 percent of RMG exports.

If we consider the trend over the last decade, export concentration has increased from 67.7 percent in 1990 to 81.9 percent in 2014, according to one study. If we compare Bangladesh with comparable Asian countries (India, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam), we have the highest level of export concentration.

phenomenal growth in the share of this industry is good news, but also carries some potential hazard. One doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to be aware of the dangers of over-reliance on RMG as our primary foreign exchange-earner. External shocks, be it in the form of reduced demand, higher price of cotton imports, or higher tariff in Europe, can have a major impact on the garments industry. Many of the strengths we currently enjoy are thinly based. Cheap labour cost and lax

QUOTABLE

Quote

SOREN KIERKEGAARD

PEOPLE DEMAND FREEDOM OF SPEECH AS A COMPENSATION FOR THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT WHICH THEY SELDOM USE.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Rings up

7 Washed out

11 Spain setting

12 Elevator pioneer

13 Topping (out)

14 Bar order

15 Mirror sight

16 "... -purple cow"

17 Comic Carvey

18 Not lenient

19 "See yal"

21 Haul into court

22 Pop up in some-one's shot

25 Carnival city

26 Defeat

27 Like the Super Bowl

29 Porch items

33 Mall businesses

34 Wise legislator

35 NYSE entry

36 Caming spot

37 Out of the wind

38 Twist of fiction

39 Lusty look

DOWN

40 Dry expanse

1 Retiring

2 Bush's successor

3 LBJ, for one

4 Tokyo thanks

5 Script bit

6 Decline

7 Tricky puzzle

8 Disbelief of a sort

9 Pride youngster

10 Will topic

16 Rough guesses

18 Bar seat

20 One of the Titans

22 Tiny opening

23 Tribute VIP

24 Gradual assimilation

25 Knave

28 Shoe part

30 Full of energy

31 Printer need

32 Horse sound

34 Boutique event

36 Haddock's cousin

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

HITME

OBAMA

ACHES

PUPIL

REEDS

AGORA

MAC

ERR

CAM

EGO

NET

AGO

DETECT

ALES

TREACLY

SLOG

KOPPEL

TAN

TEA

SUE

ARC

ASS

ERA

RELAX

TENON

EDUCE

ELOPE

ROBES

ROWED

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

WOW! GIZMO'S NEW 3-D PRINTER IS AMAZING!

WHAT'S HE DOING?

HE'S TAKING THE GENERAL APART AND CREATING A VIRTUAL IMPROVEMENT

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

HI KIDS!

HI DADDY!

HOW'S EVERYTHING GOING?

GREAT.

FINE.

WHERE'S MOM?

LYING DOWN.

SHE TOLD US TO ANNOY YOU FOR A WHILE.