

TIB's report on  
public universities

Take cognisance of it

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh's (TIB) report on recruitment of lecturers in as many as 13 public universities makes for grim reading. The anti-corruption watchdog brings to light cases of corruption and irregularities at these varsities where lecturers have been appointed in exchange for brown envelopes. It is indeed deeply disturbing that while appointing a teacher at the highest seat of learning, indeed any seat of learning, the authorities should look for anything else but a person's academic records.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed a pattern of denial on the part of any institution that had come under TIB's radar. Instead of taking corrective measures, a net of apprehension was cast over the very motive behind these reports. Instead of dismissing this report summarily, the authorities would do well to take cognisance of it since there may be credible grounds for the findings.

Given the alacrity with which corruption has spread its tentacles far and wide in our society, the TIB's report, though disquieting, needs to be taken in earnest. A well-carried out survey is a government's best friend, as it gives the latter an unadulterated assessment of the reality on ground and helps the concerned authorities to take corrective measures.

Corruption is a sad part of our life. Neither the authority's denial nor its knee-jerk response will help to eradicate this menace. TIB has taken the laudable steps of finding the lacunae, and we believe, it is incumbent upon the authorities to plug the hole in the system. Shooting the messenger never helps.

Cost overruns in  
public worksPoor planning, poorer  
implementation

THE 12.5 km Oxygen-Hathazari road expansion project is three years too late. And that has pushed up the cost considerably. The original timeline for the completion of the project was December 2013, but thanks to the delays, the national exchequer is now being depleted by an additional Tk 96 crore! Delays in project execution are not merely a question of putting public money to good use but also causing sufferings to commuters and hampering the movement of bulk goods. This project is of major import because motorised transport to and from the port city of Chittagong are dependent on this intersection to go to various destinations like Chittagong University, Rangamati and Khagrachhari districts.

It would not be wrong to state that the same situation exists with the bulk of all the hundreds of projects that the various departments undertake. This is typical of public construction projects in the country that is beset with unrealistic planning coupled with poor implementation. What we find appalling is that the excuse for project timeline extensions often boils down to land acquisition, as also in this case. When a project is undertaken, planners should already be aware precisely what land will be required to complete the work. Yet, as in the case of this road expansion work, there is a piecemeal approach to acquiring land. Naturally, the cost of land has appreciated over the period since prices will inflate when there is time lapse and when new infrastructure is coming up. It is high time we go back to the drawing board to address these systemic deficiencies so that projects start and finish on time and the public benefits from timely completion of works.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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Obama's failed promise  
on Israel-Palestine  
victims

On 4 June 2009 at the Major Reception Hall in Cairo, US President Barack Obama called for improved mutual understanding and relations between the Islamic world and the West, stressing that both parties should do more to confront violent extremism. He called for peace between Israel and Palestinians. Obama not only reaffirmed America's alliance with Israel calling their mutual bond 'unbreakable', but also described Palestinian statelessness as 'intolerable', recognising their aspirations for statehood and dignity as legitimate—just as legitimate as Israel's desire for a Jewish homeland.

Looking back on the historic speech of this gifted orator, one can only imagine how peaceful the world, and especially Middle East, would have been had Barack Obama been able to move the world and delivered on the promises made in the 2009 speech.

S.R. Jewel

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Is rapid urbanisation good  
or bad for Bangladesh?POLITICS  
OF CLIMATE  
CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

In the last few weeks, Dhaka has hosted a number of international workshops and meetings on issues to do with migration and also on urbanisation. One of the outcomes of these series of meetings is that the two issues are very much intertwined in the context of Bangladesh where rural-to-urban migration, primarily to Dhaka, is the major issue.

In this column, I will focus on the issue of Bangladesh's rapid urbanisation based on discussions at the three-day conference on Urban Resilience held in Dhaka last week and answer a series of questions which seem to be the most relevant in the current context.

**Is rapid urbanisation good or bad?** There seems to be quite a difference of opinion on whether we should encourage or discourage rapid urbanisation in Bangladesh. In my view, it does not matter what we think, it is in fact a reality that cannot be prevented but needs to be managed. Failure to manage it will mean that it becomes a big problem, but if we do manage it then it need not be one.

The problem with rapid urbanisation based on rural-to-urban migration in Bangladesh is not that it is happening, but that almost all of it is happening in Dhaka. Hence, the solution to managing this urbanisation is to invest in other cities and towns around the country to attract the migrants there instead of Dhaka. This will mean investment in jobs, education, healthcare, etc., in secondary towns of Bangladesh.

**Are slum-dwellers welcome or not?** Within our major cities, especially Dhaka, we have an ambivalent attitude to slums and slum-dwellers with some of us seeing them as a major problem to be solved by removing them while others see them worth investing in.

On this issue my view is that every person living in a city, regardless of where, is a citizen of the city and deserves to be treated equally as any other citizen. Hence, slum-dwellers deserve to be treated as citizens and be provided with services such as electricity, water, sanitation, healthcare, etc. While I accept this is not going to be easy, nevertheless,



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it should be done as a matter of principle.

**Is infrastructure more important than people?**

At the moment, the investments leading to rapid urbanisation in Dhaka, and a few other cities and towns, are in infrastructure development such as housing by the private sector and roads and embankments by the public sector.

Despite the preparation and adoption of master plans for many cities and towns these infrastructure investments tend to take place in an unplanned manner

(often in violation of the master plan or other legislation). While it will not be easy to reverse this trend, we need to think about shifting the emphasis from infrastructure to people, with a bias in favour of the poorest and most

vulnerable people. This will require the involvement and active participation of many different citizen-stakeholders in both planning as well as implementation of plans for all our cities and towns.

**What is the role of the private sector?**

The private sector, particularly the real estate sector, is a major factor in the process of rapid urbanisation, especially in Dhaka. Other sectors include the transport and commercial sectors at the large enterprise level and a very large informal sector of small vendors, rickshaw pullers, etc.

These actors making their own

individual decisions have an impact at the aggregate level on the quality of life in the cities. The problem arises if we allow individual decisions to prevail over the collective good, which is the responsibility of the government. The rampant building of private structures in wetlands in Dhaka which are protected by law is a good example of the rich flouting the law with impunity.

Bangladesh does not need many new policies and laws but does need to implement the existing laws more effectively.

**Are women safe in cities?**

One of the issues that have come to greater attention of late is the focus on female citizens of our towns and cities where the lack of safety, particularly for young girls, has become a real and growing problem. While there are many reasons for the lack of female empowerment in general, the need for women to feel safe while they move around and even when they are at home is a high priority. This needs to be achieved both through the effective enforcement of laws by concerned authorities, and even more importantly through civic education of young boys to improve their behaviour.

**How will our urbanisation deal with climate change?**

Finally, let me take on the issue of climate change linked to migration and

urbanisation, where the potential adverse impacts of climate change will exacerbate the vulnerabilities of the cities and towns to floods, cyclones in the coastal areas, etc. Particularly in Dhaka city, the main problem is drainage congestion from heavy rainfall, which is already a major periodic problem for millions of citizens. These issues will need to be taken into account in all future investments in urban development all over the country.

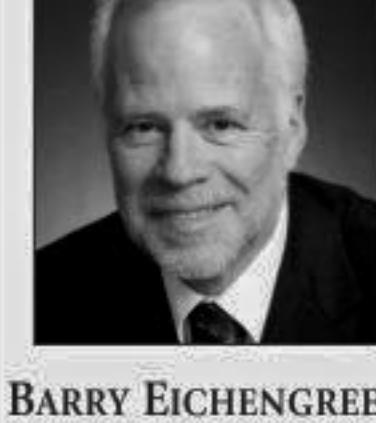
The problem of urbanisation and that of climate change tend to be cross-cutting as they affect almost every other aspect of development and people's lives. Hence, mainstreaming both urbanisation and climate change into the next set of national plans should be a priority for the future development of Bangladesh. But even more important than the technical mainstreaming into planning is the need to be much better at involving people and citizens from different walks of life in the planning process and the implementation of those plans.

National plans that are genuinely owned by the citizens are much more likely to be implemented voluntarily by the citizens. This has to be the ultimate goal of planning as we cannot enforce them from above.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

## The Age of Hyper-Uncertainty



BARRY EICHENGREEN

THE year 2017 will mark the 40th anniversary of the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Age of Uncertainty*. Forty years is a long time, but it is worth looking back and reminding ourselves of how much Galbraith and his readers had to be uncertain about.

In 1977, as Galbraith was writing, the world was still reeling from the effects of the first OPEC oil-price shock and wondering whether another one was in the pipeline (as it were). The United States was confronting slowing growth and accelerating inflation, or stagflation, a novel problem that raised questions about policymakers' competence and the adequacy of their economic models. Meanwhile, efforts to rebuild the Bretton Woods international monetary system had collapsed, casting a shadow over prospects for international trade and global economic growth.

For all these reasons, the golden age of stability and predictability that was the third quarter of the twentieth century seemed to have abruptly drawn to a close, to be succeeded by a period of greatly heightened uncertainty.

That's how things looked in 1977, anyway. Viewed from the perspective of 2017, however, the uncertainty of 1977 seems almost enviable. In 1977, there was no President Donald Trump. Jimmy Carter may not go down in history as one of the best US presidents, but he did not threaten actions that placed the entire global system at risk. He did not turn his back on America's international commitments such as NATO and the World Trade Organisation.

Nor did Carter go to war with the Federal Reserve or pack its board with sympathetic appointees willing to sacrifice sound money to his reelection prospects. On the contrary, he appointed Paul Volcker, a towering pillar of monetary stability, as chairman of the Board of Governors. And although Carter did not succeed in balancing the federal budget, he didn't blow it up, either.

Whether Trump slaps a tariff on Chinese goods, repudiates the North American Free Trade Agreement, packs the Federal Reserve Board, or undermines fiscal sustainability remains to be seen. Conceivable outcomes range from mildly reassuring to utterly catastrophic. Who knows what will happen? By today's standards, Carter was the embodiment of predictability.

In 1977, moreover, the prospects for European integration were rosy. Denmark, Ireland, and, most notably, the United Kingdom had recently joined a rapidly growing European Community. The EC was attracting members, not losing them. It was a club that countries sought to join precisely in order to achieve



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faster economic growth.

Moreover, to buttress its common market, the EC had just established a regional monetary system, the suggestively named "snake in the tunnel." While this was far from a perfect monetary system, it had one very positive attribute: countries could leave in hard economic times, and rejoin if and when the outlook brightened.

In 2017, in contrast, negotiations over Brexit will continue to cast a dark cloud of uncertainty over the European Union. How those negotiations will proceed and how long they will take are anyone's guess. Moreover, the main questions raised by Britain's decision to leave – whether other countries will follow and, indeed, whether the EU itself has a future – remain far from resolved.

Meanwhile Europe's monetary house remains half built. The eurozone is neither appealing enough to attract additional members nor flexible enough to grant troubled incumbents a temporary holiday, in the manner of the currency snake. The euro will likely survive the year, inertia being what it is. Beyond that, it is difficult to say.

In 1977, uncertainties emanating from emerging markets were not on commentators' radar screens. Developing countries in Latin America and East Asia were growing, although they depended increasingly on a drip feed of foreign loans from money-centre banks.

China, still largely cut off from the world, did not figure in this discussion. And even if something went wrong in the Third World, developing countries were simply too small to drag down the global economy.

The situation today couldn't be more different. What happens in China, Brazil, or Turkey doesn't stay in China, Brazil, or Turkey. On the contrary, developments in these countries have first-order implications for the world economy, given how emerging markets have accounted for the majority of global growth in recent years. China has an unmanageable corporate-debt problem and a government whose commitment to restructuring the economy is uncertain. Turkey has a massive current-account deficit, an erratic president, and an unstable geopolitical neighbourhood. And if political scandals were export goods, Brazil would have a clear comparative advantage.

Although *The Age of Uncertainty* was about much more than the year 1977, it captured the tenor of the times. But if Galbraith were writing the same book in 2017, he probably would call the 1970s *The Age of Assurance*.

The writer is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Cambridge. His latest book is *Hall of Mirrors: The Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the Uses – and Misuses – of History*.

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