

TOWARDS SDGs

Promoting transparency



DR IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

The government of Bangladesh recognises combating corruption as critical to progress towards realising the Perspective Plan - Vision 2021, the 7th Five Year Plan (7FYP) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Vision 2021 asserts that "the Government is determined to confront and root out the scourge of corruption from the body politic of Bangladesh ... (and) intends to strengthen transparency and accountability of all government institutions as integral part of a programme of social change to curb corruption."

"Promoting good governance and curbing corruption" is listed high among 12 development goals identified by the 7FYP, which also commits to strengthen the democratic governance process to ensure participation of all citizens and sound functioning of all democratic institutions.

SDGs - a paradigm shift
As a party to the SDGs 2030, Bangladesh has pledged to "promote a peaceful and inclusive society ... provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." Under target 16.5 Bangladesh commits to "substan-

The fundamental difference of SDGs with MDGs, on which Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress, is a paradigm shift for quality compared to quantity alone. The pledges of inclusive society, leaving no one behind, accountable and inclusive institutions and fundamental freedoms can only be achieved through higher levels of participatory governance and corruption control. These lofty pledges on governance, accountability and anti-corruption, captured under goal 16, are not only stand-alone targets but are meant to be mainstreamed in each of the 17 SDGs.

As a State Party to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) Bangladesh has also promised to "promote active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption."

Corruption - the key challenge
The government may have credible data to support the Finance Minister's assertion at least twice recently that corruption costs Bangladesh 2-3 percent of GDP. This is apparently exclu-

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) based on people's experiences. It further showed that more than 70 percent of those who paid bribes were forced to do so because it was the only option, an unbearable burden of impunity in daily life.

Corruption stories dominated media headlines throughout 2016 as usual. Just to mention a few, construction work of rail connection on both sides of the Padma bridge project was given to a company allegedly without the due competitive process.

Recruitment business in food department and embezzlement of crores in the name of training and workshop in health sector were widely reported.

Striking irregularities were identified by Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) in the use of fund for the solar power project in Kaptai. An unholy syndicate of officials managed to swindle tens of crores from the Matarbari coal-based power project funds in the name of compensating the affected.

Profiteering by politically and otherwise influential people from safety net programmes including low-cost rice for the poor has tarnished a well-meaning government initiative. About 70 bank officials were detained,

The idea of managing conflict of interest is almost absent among many in important public functionaries, whether elected or appointed. We need a legal and operational structure to manage conflict of interest so that a power-holder's private interest cannot be improperly promoted by decisions and/or actions from his/her official position.

The objectives of a robust system of conflict of interest management founded on legal and ethical basis would be to: a) ensure that public interest is protected and served by obliging power-holders to make decisions on merit without regard for personal or group interest; b) ensure openness and scrutiny by facilitating disclosure of interests and potential conflicts; c) maintain effective distance by recusing oneself from any decision that may benefit the power-holder; d) prevent not only personal gains thanks to holding public positions but also to protect them from suffering undue losses; and e) ensure effective tracking and monitoring of compliance.

Business integrity
Side by side with such preventive measures in the public sector, a business integrity programme consistent with the National Integrity Strategy is long overdue, with the aim of creating ethical business practices. Collective action against corruption, as in many countries, may demonstrate that corrupt practices, coercive or collusive, are not indispensable for doing business. There are many standards and practices of self-regulation that can motivate counterparts in the public sector to stay away from corruption.

Adoption of sectoral and sub-sectoral code of conduct to practice regularly updatable disclosure of "what you earn, where and how you earn, what you pay, and whom you pay" including information on indirect beneficial ownership could go a long way in deterring corruption in the private sector's interaction with the public.

Access to information
Implementation of RTI Act 2009 must be further invigorated to ensure the people's right to know, especially in relation to what happens to public resources. Where such resources come from, how they are spent and on what basis, etc., are the key questions to which answers must be disclosed proactively and on demand. The idea that some institutions in the public sector like law enforcement and security agencies are exempted from such obligations is unfounded. Information on corruption and human rights violation by institutions included in the so-called exemption list is well within the jurisdiction of the Act.

Protecting the whistleblower
Equally important is the enforcement of the Whistleblower Protection Act of 2011 which remains much more under-implemented. Whistleblowing is a dilemma that needs to be coped with - challenge of protecting job and even security against that of acting in the public interest. Problems faced by the driver of the vehicle that carried bag-loads of money collected through recruitment business in the railways department and by the customs officer in Chittagong only reaffirm how important it is to protect those who want to live honestly and are willing to take risks for public interest. People must have the sense of empowerment to "blow the whistle".

Voice and demand
To ease public harassment in service delivery sectors digitisation and online transactions system must be extensively introduced and robustly practiced. People have many stories of corruption to tell each other. They may also have ideas and experiences to share with each other about how they are standing up successfully against the menace despite many odds. Such stories are under-reported due to a deficit of trust in the system and institutions that are supposed to protect the victims rather than perpetrators.

As the corrupt continue to remain unpunished, it not only frustrates the victims and makes them more vulnerable, many honest and heretofore uncorrupt people are forced to take recourse to corrupt practices. Raising voice and demand against corruption must be facilitated by the government if it is sincere about its policy commitments. If it restricts the scope of dissent against corruption it will only protect the corrupt, and the lofty SDG pledge to "leave no one behind" will only be frustrated.

The writer is Executive Director,



WWW.SIMPLE.COM

tially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms"; under 16.4 to significantly reduce illicit financial flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets; and under 16.10 to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms."

Side by side with such preventive measures in the public sector, a business integrity programme consistent with the National Integrity Strategy is long overdue, with the aim of creating ethical business practices. Collective action against corruption, as in many countries, may demonstrate that corrupt practices, coercive or collusive, are not indispensable for doing business.

sive of Bangladesh's contribution at a rate of over a billion dollars of illicit financial outflow per year, nor does it include other forms of money laundering like the Malaysian second home project, of which we are one of the top clients.

The Chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in a letter to the Cabinet Secretary highlighted public procurement, government recruitment, project approval and implementation as the key corruption-prone areas. He reminded that corruption control is a catalyst to increased foreign direct investment, job opportunities, poverty reduction and enhanced equity, and stressed the need for effective oversight mechanism. The Cabinet Secretary reportedly followed up with letters to Secretaries of all ministries calling for effective oversight as a means to prevent corruption.

Many faces of corruption
Bangladesh is no longer at the very bottom of global ranking as per corruption perceptions index (CPI) as it used to be during 2001-2005. But ranked 15th from below with a score of 26 out of 100 in 2016 we still remain far below the global average of 43, considered to indicate moderate success in corruption control. Bangladesh remains the second worst performer in South Asia after Afghanistan.

People's sufferings from bribery and other forms of corrupt practices in key sectors of service delivery remains very high as 67.8 percent of the respondents were victims of such harassment according to the national household survey 2015 conducted by

though hardly any high level individual allegedly responsible for banking sector scandals has been brought to justice leaving the sector in shambles.

Delayed implementation of infrastructure projects has remained a convenient source of unearned income. Corrupt practices coupled with low efficiency in infrastructure projects continue to cost Bangladeshis more than most other Asian countries. The majority of the Bangladeshi youth told a global survey that corruption in public sector frustrates them most, so does lack of accountability and honesty.

Zero-sum game and corruption
A qualitative transformation has taken place over the years in our political space. In the first Parliament of Bangladesh the proportion of MPs who had business as their primary occupation was below 18 percent. Rising steadily since then, the ratio has reached 57 and 59 percent respectively in the 9th and 10th Parliament. This does not include indirect beneficial ownerships. No one can object to the right of individuals of any profession to enter politics, though questions do arise if such entries, especially by investing millions, are prompted by aspirations of profit-making.

Politics has turned for many into a zero-sum game where the winner takes all with a tendency to establish monopolistic control of the political space and the spoils that come along. Business and profit-making relationships of public representatives with the government is considered a matter of politically legitimised right. Business, investment, recruitment,

public contracting, profiteering, land grabbing, embezzlement, extortion and influence peddling become the object of a turf-war between various sections within the winners to an extent that it becomes a way of life in politics. In a context of competitive abuse of power, corruption becomes a killer.

For the loser on the other hand, it is more than a lost opportunity of profit-making. Boycott of the parliament and election, often taking recourse to violence, becomes a standard practice of the political force outside power. As violence begets violence, the cost of failing to be in power keeps on mounting with frustrations joined by various insecurities. Political activism of those out of power then loses strategic edge leading to further monopolisation of the political space.

The process of establishing partisan political control and weakening of the institutional structure of accountability of the national integrity system (NIS) - the parliament, executive, law enforcement agencies, administration, judiciary, media, private sector, civil society, and even various professional groups - tends to accelerate. ACC continues to struggle to gain the trust of the people. Abuse of power, especially at the high level, is hardly brought to justice. On the other hand, a denial syndrome prevails amongst a section of the powerful who not only react sharply, but also find evil designs and conspiracy against the state when civil society raises voice against corruption.

Is corruption control possible?
As difficult as it may seem, effective corruption control is certainly possible. Four mutually reinforcing drivers are indispensable. First is the political will at all levels, not only on paper but in practice without fear or favour. Second, the corrupt must be brought to justice ensuring equality of all before law irrespective of the identity and status of the person. Third, the institutions of the NIS must be transparent, efficient, accountable and effective, both individually and collectively. Fourth, conducive environment must be created for people at large, particularly media, civil society, and NGOs to raise and strengthen the demand for accountability and against corruption.

Managing conflict of interest
A key driving force is an endemic malaise of mixing up what is public with what is private, much of it related to the enmeshing of politics with business. We were recently told by a senior political leader that being in power means enrichment of the power-holder. The idea of managing conflict of interest is almost absent among many in important public functionaries, whether elected or appointed. We need a legal and operational structure to manage conflict of interest so that a power-holder's private interest cannot be improperly promoted by decisions and/or actions from his/her official position.