

Set to reach middle income status by 2021, Bangladesh is at the crossroads of an economy in transition. That big donors may reprioritise towards least developed and developing countries is a reality we must be ready to face by making the right provisions for facilitating entrepreneurial activity. In light of this changing scenario and the unequal distribution of our growth till now, it is time to look towards sustainable models of delivering socially minded goods and services.

With this in mind, the British Council held the third Social Enterprise Policy Dialogue between February 22 and 23 to

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
POLICY DIALOGUE 2017

COLLABORATION FOR IMPACT



PHOTO: COURTESY

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bring together national and international social entrepreneurs, development professionals, social investors, and policymakers to share and learn from experiences and to identify opportunities to boost the growth of social enterprise in Bangladesh.

As the British Council's recently published State of Social Enterprise survey has indicated, social enterprises are playing a promising role in addressing challenges faced by communities nationwide. There is greater youth and female leadership among social businesses compared to mainstream ones, and 32 percent of these ventures are addressing Bangladesh's critical skills gap. "This survey is an important step in remedying that knowledge gap that will inform the delivery of our social enterprise programme in Bangladesh, disseminate sector knowledge and best practice between the UK and Bangladesh and support our shared goal of building safer, more inclusive and prosperous societies," said Barbara Wickham, Director of British Council Bangladesh, at the event.

The sector is in strong need of timely support and recognition, and its potential requires acknowledgment from the policymakers. Themed "Collaboration for Impact", the dialogue will support the development of a social enterprise policy framework in Bangladesh and a nexus of policy influencers, entrepreneurs, academia and private sector specialists from East Asia, South Asia, and the UK. This year the event was organised in collaboration with the Access to Information (a2i) Programme of the Prime Minister's Office and key social enterprise actors in the country such as Better Stories, Dnet, futurestartup, mPower and team engine.

TAKING A PRO-SOCIAL APPROACH TO BUSINESS

A spokesperson for social enterprise and an accidental but avid serial entrepreneur, Peter Holbrook, keynote speaker at this year's dialogue and Chief Executive of Social Enterprise UK, shared the UK's policies and best practices around the sector. Social Enterprise UK is the British national body for social enterprise, which works to raise awareness of social enterprise, garner support from politicians, and work with private sector organisations that want to explore or consolidate their position in the growing social enterprise market. We spoke to him about how to better facilitate social enterprise in Bangladesh.

Even though the concept of social enterprise has been around for a while, there is still a lack of awareness or understanding about it. Given that one of the aspects of your work is to promote the benefits of social enterprise, how would you disseminate the concept to laymen who could be potential social entrepreneurs in a developing country like Bangladesh?

Principally, social enterprises are businesses, but they are businesses that have a primary social purpose, rather than a primary profit purpose. That social purpose is in the DNA, the fabric of the business. All the decisions that are taken are based on creating shared value. Value for the communities, for the staff, for suppliers, for the environment.

And, actually, there is increasingly not just a strong moral case for social enterprise, but a strong business case as well. I have found consumers that would come to us because we were a social



Peter Holbrook

enterprise. For example, I would never have had the opportunity to deliver all the catering services to Downing Street had it not been for that social purpose. The Prime Minister was keen to see a social business operate within Downing Street because he wanted to use the power of Downing Street's procurement to empower people and provide them with opportunities. So I think that for any social entrepreneur or any entrepreneur, there is strong business benefit in taking a pro-social approach.

What do you think are the biggest challenges that social enterprises face in Bangladesh as well as worldwide?

In Bangladesh, I would say the biggest challenge is that the government has not created an ecosystem or an environment where social enterprises are fully recognised. There are NGOs and there are private businesses. But a social enterprise is in between the two. And therefore, you need a supportive policy environment so you can benefit from accessing capital, building awareness about what you're doing and why you are doing it, and getting some grant funding to seed your businesses.

More broadly, I think all around the world there are three main challenges that all social enterprises face. One is the lack of awareness. So there is a big job to be done in terms of building awareness. In the UK, we are going to have a Hollywood actor, who has recently found social enterprise and believes it will be able to nourish and improve the community where he came from, come out and support social enterprise.

Secondly, the issue is access to capital. Where do you get the money to invest and start these businesses? Traditionally the capital markets and banks are after profit maximisation and social enterprises obviously sometimes choose to create social benefit rather than maximise profit.

And then thirdly, lots of social enterprises work in areas in which the government also delivers, like education, health, social care. But public procurement often favours large businesses rather than small ones and social enterprises. Thus, these smaller businesses struggle to get the same opportunities to trade with the government that large corporates do.

What do you think social entrepreneurs themselves must do to facilitate and move ahead with their work?

They need to create their own ecosystem. And that means coming together, staying together, and working together. There is a huge amount that can be done with social enterprises trading with each other, nourishing each other's businesses and building partnerships.

Secondly, there is a real need to speak with one voice. Often, if you speak to five different social entrepreneurs, you will get five different ideas about what the government should do. What is important is that you come together. So you need a Social Enterprise Bangladesh that's driven by social entrepreneurs to create a common voice and clarity of action that can be used for engagement with corporates, the government, universities and schools, etc.

ENDEAVOUR

On a warm spring afternoon, as I was desperately looking for a vacant rickshaw near the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong city, I heard a woman shouting from behind, "Baba! Wait, let me just finish my roti! I will take you to the destination." Initially I thought she was talking to someone else. But when I looked over my shoulder -- simply out of curiosity -- I saw a woman, in her mid 40s, wearing a red-and-black saree, a

songs on her rickshaw's sound system before initiating the ride and told me to "cheer up" as I was probably looking too weary. I told her who I was and asked to tell me her tale. The chatty, fun-loving woman started sharing her story with me without hesitation, beginning with "My life is not a fairytale, Baba!"

This extraordinary 45-year-old woman from Comilla arrived in Chittagong with her three sons nearly a decade ago in

but the pay was insufficient to cover the basic needs of her family.

Finally, five years ago, she decided to learn how to paddle a cycle rickshaw. She asked a neighbour who owned a rickshaw to help her learn the tricks of the trade. "I practised for days. It was tough at the beginning. But I knew that at least I will be earning a better living. When I realised that I was ready for the road, I hired a rickshaw and a paid a boy to help me

the city for being the country's only known woman rickshaw-puller. Her conspicuous red helmet and law-abiding driving skills have brought her in the good books of the law enforcers too.

Jasmine earns around Tk. 600 per day, of which she has to pay Tk. 300 as rickshaw rent. With this income, she ensures the education of her children. The eldest is an SSC examinee while the younger twins are still at school.



PHOTO: AFP

cardigan and a red helmet, signalling me to wait for her. She was eating lunch at a roadside food cart on a footpath, oblivious to the stares and loud sneers of other rickshaw-pullers and passers-by.

She already had my attention. As I slowly approached her, I noticed there was a parked battery-run rickshaw nearby and realised that I was looking at Mosammat Jasmine Begum a.k.a the "Pagli Khala" of Chittagong -- the only known woman rickshaw-puller in our country of 16 crore people.

Jasmine khala was a legend, as far as I was concerned. I had heard anecdotes of her from many a local friend. As a journalist, I had a latent desire to meet her someday; I was thus excited to have run into her so fortuitously on a short trip to the port city.

She again greeted me with a wide smile and said: "This is my only meal till dinner. That's why I'm taking a while. Please go and sit on my rickshaw. I'm coming within a minute or two!"

Jasmine switched on Bangla movie

A RIDE WITH JASMINE KHALA

ABIR MAHMUD JAHAN

search of work. Her migrant husband married another woman and stopped contacting her 14 years ago.

"I could have gone back to my father's place. But I didn't want to be a burden to anybody. Also I had to feed my kids. I can bear everything but my sons' miseries. I was desperate," Jasmine said.

She tried working as a maid but did not find the job rewarding. "I worked more than 12 hours a day and couldn't spend enough time with my sons. They stayed alone at home, which was a major cause of tension for me," she remarked. Then she worked at garment factories for a while,

push the vehicle from behind," she said. Most of the passengers initially refused boarding her rickshaw and many taunted her saying she was doing "a man's job." Many passengers even tried to pay her less saying, "Why should a woman puller be paid equal to a male?" "I was upset in the beginning, but later on, I realised their words are meaningless. They don't feed my family. I don't live at the mercy of others but earn by turning my blood into sweat," Jasmine remarked with conviction.

Initially, it was difficult for Jasmine to pull the rickshaw through the slopes and sharp turns of the hilly Chittagong road. Two years ago, she hired a battery-run rickshaw which, she said, is "much more comfortable".

Five years into the profession, Chittagong city has finally embraced her as its own. She is now a famous face in

"The money is not enough to give them the comfort they require to study without any disruptions but I am still trying my best," Jasmine said to me, while we took a tea-break at a roadside tea-stall where she insisted on paying the bill. "Many tell me to retire and send my boys to work. But I believe they should finish their education first. I want them to be in a better place than they are now," she added. "I'm planning to buy a rickshaw, so I don't have to give away half my daily income in rent."

Her indomitable spirit and urge to make something of herself, against the established norms of this patriarchal society, has made her a role model to the younger generation and to the country at large. Jasmine khala, whoever, remains oblivious to her "fame" -- she is happy simply to live life on her own terms, protecting and providing for her family.

The writer is a journalist and author based in Dhaka.