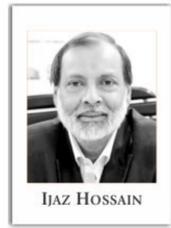


Budgetary allocation for energy is not enough



IJAZ HOSSAIN
 BY Bangladesh standards, we have been given an enormous budget. Five years back such a large budget would have been unthinkable, but it is a reality. This certainly displays growth and robust performance of the economy. The power and energy sectors have received the second highest allocation at Tk 21,000 crore. The power sector has received more than Tk 18,000 crore while the energy sector has been allocated only approximately Tk 2,500 crore. Our prime minister wants electricity to reach 100 percent of the households by 2021, hence the large allocation targeting that goal.

The three principal challenges for the government with respect to the power and energy sector are to: (i) supply uninterrupted and quality electricity to all customers, especially to industrial customers; (ii) keep prices of electricity and gas at levels that will allow Bangladeshi industries to remain globally competitive; and (iii) make a smooth transition from natural gas to alternative fuels for urban household cooking.

Has the finance minister addressed these issues and is this budget adequate to meet the challenges stated above? An equally important issue is this: do the responsible agencies have the capacity and capability of implementing such a large budget?

The present government in the last eight years has done a great job of increasing electricity supply, and peak generation has gone from 4200MW in 2009 to 9400MW in 2017. In effect it has been able to build more capacity in the last eight years than any other time in the history of Bangladesh. But has this growth been sustainable? Of the 5200MW of additional peak generation, the lion's share comes from independent power producers (IPPs) and rental oil-fired generation. Can these oil-fired generators be called power plants? Some of these units are 20MW in size. Many of these power plants have used secondhand equipment because these were

supposed to be operated for three to five years.

Peak generation has more than doubled in the last eight years, which undoubtedly is a great achievement, but the supply still remains unreliable. Most rural industries complain about several hours of load-shedding per day, low voltage, frequency and voltage fluctuations, and therefore, cannot rely on the grid. Those who do not have captive power still have to invest in diesel-fired standby generators to maintain smooth operation. Thus we may see generation doubling from the present 13,000MW to 24,000MW in 2021 but with the same unreliability lingering on.

What does it take to provide quality power? To begin with, it requires huge investments in transmission and distribution. The investment for this must come almost entirely from budgetary allocation. Whereas it is very easy to involve the private sector in generation, it is very difficult to do the same in transmission and distribution. Bilateral and multilateral organisations have done some funding, especially for cross-border trade, but the total requirement is several times more.

The power sector budget allocation of more than Tk 18,000 crore needs scrutiny. What is the real allocation for improving the existing transmission and distribution infrastructure? We all know that the transmission and distribution infrastructure is being rapidly expanded in an effort to give electricity to all households. Therefore, new infrastructure needs to be built. In recent years, we have been hearing that the power outages that we are experiencing are not load-shedding. Rather it is the inadequacy of the transmission and distribution network. Some infrastructure, especially those owned by the Rural Electrification Board, has not been upgraded since those were set up nearly 40 years back. Not only are they way past their shelf life, but they also have to carry much more electricity than originally designed.

The low budget allocation for the energy sector clearly demonstrates that the government has nearly given up on trying to develop domestic supply of

primary energy. The low priority on gas exploration and coal development implies that the government is quite content on letting the primary energy sector become totally import-based. Of course the easiest thing to do is import to meet whatever shortfall there is. But there are consequences of having an import-based primary energy sector: major price increase of fuels and dangers of supply disruption.

Alarm bells have already started ringing in the business and industrial community. They are justifiably apprehensive that primary energy, mainly natural gas, would become very expensive once LNG imports start. As soon as the first lot (500mmcf) of LNG is added to the domestic supply, price of gas for industrial consumers will increase from USD 3 per 1000 cubic feet to USD 4.5 per 1000 cubic feet – a 50 percent increase. That is only the beginning because as more and more LNG is added to the system, the gas tariff will increase. Once domestic gas reserves are totally depleted, which may not be that far away if no new gas is discovered, the tariff will reach LNG import cost, which in 10 years' time can easily be USD 12-15 per 1000 cubic feet. To appreciate the magnitude of this tariff note that BPDB now pays approximately USD 1.1 per 1000 cubic feet.

At LNG price can the energy-intensive industries survive? Bangladesh has been doing very well in the ceramic and steel sectors. There is a grave danger of these two industries dying out. It is vital to keep energy costs down. Historically, Bangladesh has had very low energy prices. But that is changing fast. Such a fast transition to higher prices is causing great concern amongst industrialists. There are clear indications in the budget that prices of electricity and gas may have to be revised upwards to accommodate the import of expensive LNG.

Energy security in Bangladesh is decreasing at an alarming rate as our natural gas reserves deplete and coal lies unutilised. According to a BUET study 92 percent of the primary energy for electricity generation will have to be imported. In

such a scenario energy efficiency (EE) can play a very important role. Anything between 20 and 50 percent can be saved through a good EE programme. A 50 percent reduction in primary energy consumption could mean literally billions of dollars worth in savings in 2030.

SREDA, entrusted to promote renewable energy and EE, has not been able to undertake any real measures to save energy. This woeful situation has come about principally from a lack of funding in renewable energy and EE. This year the finance minister has put emphasis on EE, but it is anyone's guess how much would be actually spent on promotion of EE. Going by past experiences, the allocation would certainly not match rhetoric.

The most surprising aspect of the budget is the lack of mention of LPG. The government has increased household gas prices to Tk 950 in an attempt to bring parity with LPG, which is clearly unaffordable for the middle class. If budgetary support is not provided to keep the price of LPG down, the urban lower income households will suffer greatly. For many, the price of cooking fuels and electricity will reach 10 percent of their monthly salary, which is a tremendous burden. There was talk of providing subsidy for LPG but that did not materialise; instead a tax has been imposed on LPG cylinders.

It is apparent that the government is focused on three things: (i) achieving 100 percent electrification even though it will lead to a highly unreliable power supply; (ii) opting for easy solutions, for example, importing fuels rather than developing own energy resources; and (iii) building megaprojects because these are visible and can be used to boost popularity.

The challenges for the energy sector are many. If budgetary allocation does not match the requirements, both in terms of total requirement and distribution, then the problems will keep growing. We will see several megaprojects but the health of the sector will not improve.

The writer is Professor, Chemical Engineering Department, BUET and advisor to the government on energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emission mitigation.

Bangladesh human trafficking situation worsens

Need a formal mechanism to help victims

BD is downgraded further in the Tier 2 Watch List (where it has remained for the last five years) according to the US State Department's latest annual report on human trafficking released on June 27. According to it the government's investigations, prosecutions and convictions of trafficking crimes decreased over the reporting period. It is worrying to find that the government has no formal mechanism to deal with victims of trafficking, which often leads to these same people being re-trafficked because of inadequate protection. Our paper has covered the horrendous situation of human trafficking over the years and we feel it is time we overhauled the operating procedures and guidelines to help victims of this evil trade. This would include giving specialised training to members of law enforcement, immigration officers and labour inspectors stationed with our missions abroad.

Moreover, the level of prosecution is very dismal because the government has not dedicated enough resources to pre-trial investigations and the Women and Children Violence Protection Tribunal that tackles human trafficking, is both overburdened with cases and is uninitiated in trafficking cases. The biggest problem with trafficking from Bangladesh is of course the inability to successfully address the issue of high recruitment fees which leads to victims becoming entrapped into bonded labour. The problems are multifarious and require political will to rectify the systemic faults that exist. Unless we start making some changes, Bangladesh's position is not likely to see improvement in the next year's report.

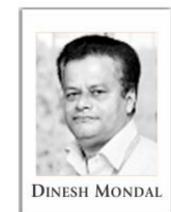
Adult literacy rate rises

But what does it really mean?

IT is good news that adult literacy rate in the country rose to a 12-year high of 72.3 percent in 2016. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) prepared the report titled "Sample Vital Registration System (SVRS)" in which it said in 2004 the rate was 51.6 percent. And from 2004 to 2015, the average yearly increase in the literacy rate among people aged above 15 was between 0.2 and 3.3 percentage points. But from 2015 to 2016, this rate rose by 7.7 percentage points, which shows a significant increase.

However, there is confusion regarding how we should define literacy. The BBS, in its report, defined that if a person can write a simple letter, she/he will be considered literate. This clearly contradicts with the definition given by the UNESCO which declares that literacy incorporates three things -- reading, writing and doing simple arithmetic. This is also a globally accepted definition of literacy. Then why have these guidelines of UNESCO not been followed in preparing this report?

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of adult literacy, which could only be possible due to the various initiatives taken by government and non-government organisations. But as the report mentions, women lagged behind men in terms of attaining literacy and the rural-urban gap was also big. So now the challenge for the government would be to reduce these gaps by widening the reach of education programmes for adults, more specifically for women, in rural areas. In addition, the government must ensure the quality of these programmes, which should be aimed at providing skills that will be in tune with universal standards of literacy, create employment opportunities and improve living standards.



DINESH MONDAL
 IN 2012, the London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases signalled a bold new vision for international cooperation, in which networking and globalisation could underpin efforts in the global South to eradicate deadly diseases that disproportionately affect the poorest communities. The London Declaration — the largest global public-health collaboration to date — helped to foster trust in the rules-based global order that emerged after World War II.

But this hard-earned trust is now in grave danger as populist forces across the Western world take aim at their countries' foreign-aid commitments. In particular, President Donald Trump has announced sweeping cuts to the United States' international aid budget, in order to appease economically frustrated US voters who want their tax money spent at home. What this approach fails to recognise is that the long-term rewards of supporting medical research in the global South far outweigh the short-term costs.

As a Bangladeshi researcher at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr), I have been intimately involved in local efforts to eradicate visceral leishmaniasis (VL, also known as kala-azar), one of the diseases covered by the London Declaration. Thanks to generous support from international donors, I have been able to conduct path-breaking research in the field.

Back in 2006, through research funded by the World Health Organisation's Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), I found virtually no sandfly-control initiatives in place in districts where VL — spread by a single species of sandfly — was endemic. That realisation was a wake-up call to policymakers and led to the initiation of sandfly-control efforts throughout the country.

Years later, as part of UBS Optimus Foundation-funded research into household-level insect-control methods, my team found that a novel technology — durable wall linings soaked with the insecticide deltamethrin — was effective in killing sandflies for up to a year after application. We are currently testing other

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Supporting the developing world's health innovators



durable insect-control solutions, including wall paints blended with three different insecticides.

This work has implications beyond VL — and beyond Bangladesh. Indoor spraying remains the most widely used method of household insect control worldwide. But in isolated rural communities, the solutions that we are researching may be more robust, convenient, and effective against not just sandflies, but also other kinds of disease-carrying insects, such as Zika-infected mosquitos.

I have also been engaged in research on novel types of VL transmission. After recovering from VL, many patients in Bangladesh go on to develop a condition known as macular post-kala-azar dermal leishmaniasis. In order to find out whether PKDL patients can act as a reservoir for VL — and therefore boost our capacity to eradicate the disease — my team and I have set up an insectarium to breed sterile sandflies.

Our insectarium — funded by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative and the Spanish Foundation for International Cooperation — is one of just seven in the world (with the majority located in developed countries). It amounts to a permanent and valuable resource for research into vector control and disease transmission in Bangladesh.

Already, the insectarium has facilitated important progress. Recent pilot experiments showed that macular PKDL

can act as a source of infection, with the results published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*. We are also using the insectarium to test insecticide resistance and susceptibility in captive sandflies — research that will support the optimisation of sandfly-control strategies throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Of course, a key element of any strategy to eradicate disease is early and effective diagnosis. When it comes to VL, standard diagnoses rely on the detection of circulating antibodies in blood or urine. But, because antibodies persist in the blood even after recovery, this method falsely identifies healthy, non-contagious patients as needing treatment. While a DNA-based diagnostic test provides more accurate results, the methods currently used rely on expensive equipment like thermal cyclers and functioning cold chains.

So my team went to work to develop a system for enabling DNA-based diagnosis in low-resource settings. Using an isothermal DNA amplification method, called recombinase polymerase amplification, we developed a cold-chain-independent method for detecting VL, which we then incorporated into a solar-powered mobile "lab suitcase" that can be used easily in rural settings.

We are now trying to repurpose that suitcase, so that it can also enable the diagnosis of typhoid fever and tuberculosis, further revolutionising disease surveillance in poor and rural

communities. In other words, the development of cold-chain-independent disease detection, like the rest of our research and innovations, has far-reaching implications for global health.

Yet all of the success we have achieved over the last two decades is now at risk. Donor agencies, facing reduced aid from major players like the US, could be forced to withdraw funding for the kind of research described here. With Bangladesh unable to pick up the slack, life-saving projects like ours will collapse; the long-term resources we have developed, from the insectarium to new diagnostic devices, will have to be abandoned; and the developing world's poorest communities will suffer.

More is at stake than generosity. Aid donors accrue important benefits from financing scientific research in the global South, beginning with reinforcement of the trust that underpins the fragile international order on which we all depend. More directly, supporting the development of low-cost health innovations could play a vital role in reducing the now-colossal health-care expenditure of advanced countries like the US. Those savings could, in the long term, easily offset the cost of supporting the life-saving work of organisations like icddr.

The writer is a senior scientist in the Nutrition and Infection Interaction Research Unit at icddr, b. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2017. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Flouting traffic laws with impunity

This is in reference to your editorial "Blatant flouting of traffic laws" published on June 24, 2017. It reminded me of a true story published by the Dubai-based *Khaleej Times* many years ago.

According to the report, Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of UK, had been travelling in her motorcade in London when her chauffeur drove through a red signal. A traffic policeman on duty stopped the prime minister's vehicle and slapped a fine on the driver for violating traffic law.

The prime minister expressed appreciation with the way the law enforcement agency was strictly following the law. We would like to see the laws in our country followed just as respectfully, especially through examples set by our leaders.

AKM Ehsanul Haque
 Dhaka

Price hike of essentials

Prices of essential commodities have been on the rise, with further impact due to the new budget and the Eid holidays. Even coarse rice is now too costly for the poor. The government's reduction on import duties to facilitate private sector imports was a good move, but they must remember the plight of farmers who produce rice but do not get a fair price for their production. Prices of other goods like meat and broiler chicken have also gone up by Tk 50 to 100. The government should boost the supply of essentials so that prices remain affordable for the common people.

Mohammad Zonaid Emran
 Mutual Trust Bank Limited