

Are South Asian countries ready to meet the targets of SDGs by 2030?

Steady rise in Swiss Bank deposits

What has been done to stem the outflow?

FOR five years in a row, deposits from Bangladesh in Swiss banks have risen on average 20 percent every year since 2013, to Tk5,575. Over the years, as per the Global Financial Integrity report in 2014, Bangladesh has lost between 6 and 9 billion USD to illegal money outflow. There was a time when India was topping the charts of GFI reports, but policy reforms in India and an annual automatic exchange of banking information with Switzerland paved the way for getting financial information on bank accounts held by Indian citizens in that country and vice-versa led to nearly a 50 percent drop in Indian deposits in Swiss banks over a one year period. The finance minister has said that government steps to prevent laundering of money would be visible next month. And that is what begs the question. Given that the data of deposits in Swiss banks has been in public domain since 1996, and that there has been a steady increase in the deposit amount every year since 2005, why has no effective action been taken as yet to determine whether those are legally transferred amount or otherwise, and appropriate measures taken to stymie the illegal outflow of money. And more so, when there is the Money Laundering Act which was amended in 2012, during the tenure of this government.

It is regrettable that while legal means of money transfer outside the country faces many restrictions there seems to be no impediment to illegal transfer and no palpable effective measures to prevent them. Has the government done anything to find out the final destination of the several thousand crores taken out of some state owned banks like the Basic Bank? While there are adequate rules and regulations there is little implementation, as per the view of the Asia / Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG) that visited Bangladesh last year. And thus one may ask why this apparent reluctance for decisive action. Is the administration worried that it would release a can of worms?

Waste bins wasted

A good example of poor planning

A picture published in this paper yesterday showed a dismal state of a good idea gone wrong. The hundreds of waste bins that were set up all over the city as part of the Clean Dhaka campaign by the DNCC and DSCC mayors for better garbage management in the city was without a doubt a good idea which had the potential to make our city cleaner. Instead, what the pictures show, are missing or damaged bins. Previously, too, we had published pictures of these bins overflowing with garbage or missing from their holders. What this points to are two-fold: one, that as inhabitants of the city, we are utterly indifferent to its cleanliness, and two, the authorities did not think the idea through before implementation.

Indeed, to talk about the second point, the authorities should have taken into account the feasibility of such an idea. Through beta testing on specific areas, they could have evaluated how these bins would fare, and then taken that into consideration in terms of design and material used. Significant public money was used to install these bins. So, if they end up unusable or stolen, it is money lost for no good reason. To add to that, there seems to have been a disregard about the bins upkeep and maintenance after installation. Pictures of broken and unemptied bins reveal that, alongside the fact that after installation, there has been no effort to make sure these are kept usable.

If such a good idea is to be useful to make Dhaka cleaner, then the authorities need to go beyond their role in installation. But now that the bins are there, ensuring proper management and protecting against theft should be issues of priority.



SELIM RAIHAN

THE Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are basically a set of 17 goals with 169 targets. Given the wide coverage of SDGs and the weak

performances of the South Asian countries under the MDG period, whether these countries will be able to meet the targets of SDGs by 2030 is a big question.

How should we read the SDGs as far as the priorities of the South Asian countries are concerned? In my view, SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) are at the heart of priorities mainly because of the fact that South Asian countries have national priorities aligned with these SDGs, and more importantly, these SDGs have strong linkages with other SDGs. Let us first look at the status of South Asian countries with respect to these three SDGs.

For SDG 7, in terms of access to electricity, the data on the current status of the South Asian countries are rather misleading. Both Bhutan and the Maldives have 100 percent of their population with access to electricity. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka have the access ratio of over 90 percent. India and Nepal have ratios of 79.2 percent and 85 percent respectively. Bangladesh has the lowest access ratio of 62.4 percent. However, these numbers do not match with the scenarios of severe power shortage and lack of quality electricity supply in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and India. Therefore, effective access to electricity in these countries is much lower than what the official figures suggest.

In case of SDG 8, if we look at the data on the South Asian countries' growth experience from 1980 to 2015, we will see that there are marked differences among these countries. While Bangladesh and India have been growing at much faster rates, Sri Lanka has been growing at a slower rate, Nepal's growth has been stagnant, and Pakistan's growth rate has been on a declining trend. Also, in terms of volatility of the growth rate, Bangladesh has the least volatile growth compared to other South Asian countries. Empirical studies have shown that there are numerous challenges to growth acceleration and maintenance in South Asia, and the current pattern of



Most of the South Asian countries, according to the IFPRI Hunger Index, are suffering from a high prevalence of hunger and food insecurity. A significantly large number of people in South Asia still live in poverty – 22 percent in Bangladesh and 18.5 percent in India.

PHOTO: REUTERS

growth is not sufficient to alleviate poverty and hunger or to achieve other SDGs by 2030. Furthermore, as SDG 8 also involves job creation, all South Asian countries are far behind the target of ensuring decent jobs for all. This is reflected in the fact that among the top five countries in the world with very high proportion of informal employment in the total employment sector, four are from South Asia.

As for SDG 9, a recent study (UNESCAP, 2017, "Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2017", Bangkok) shows that the calculated infrastructural indices of all South Asian countries, except the Maldives, are much lower than the average of developing countries of the Asia-Pacific and a much wider gap is observed when compared with the average of the developed countries of the Asia-Pacific. This indicates the need for a lot of infrastructural investments in the South Asian countries. As for the industrialisation target under SDG 9, while the LDCs are supposed to double their share of manufacturing to the GDP by 2030, all South Asian LDCs, except Bangladesh, are off the track as they are experiencing premature deindustrialisation.

If we look at the status in terms of other SDGs, the scorecards are not very encouraging. Under SDG 1 (no poverty),

with respect to the poverty line income of USD 1.9, although the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan have much smaller rates of poverty, for India and Bangladesh the rates are still very high, 22 percent and 18.5 percent respectively. As India accounts for around 74 percent of the population in South Asia, such a high rate of poverty means that a significantly large number of people in South Asia are still in poverty. Similarly, for SDG 2 (zero hunger), as the IFPRI Hunger Index shows, most of the South Asian countries are suffering from a high prevalence of hunger and food insecurity.

In the cases of SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education), if we look at the public expenditure on health and education in proportion to the GDP, most of the South Asian countries spend much lower than their East and Southeast Asian counterparts. Also, if we consider SDG 5 (gender inequality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), there are concerns with respect to the very low level of female labour force participation in most of the South Asian countries, with Nepal being the only exception. Furthermore, countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka experienced a sizeable rise in income inequality between 1980 and 2015, which raises further concerns

about the future of the targets under SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

A critical issue with respect to the implementation of SDGs for the South Asian countries would be the volume of resources required to finance such development goals. For example, a recent study by SANEM shows that additional resources required for the implementation of the SDGs in Bangladesh would be 10 percent of GDP in 2017, which can increase to 24 percent of GDP by 2030. It is anticipated that other South Asian countries would also have similarly high figures. Given the changing global scenario, for financing SDGs, South Asian countries will have to rely more on domestic sources, and this is, no doubt, a big challenge. It is also important to note that mere generation of resources would not ensure successful implementation of the SDGs if institutional and governance related aspects are not properly addressed.

What do we learn from the aforementioned discussion? South Asian countries are yet to be on the right track to attain most of the goals under the SDGs. Therefore, there should be renewed efforts and a strong political commitment to address the challenges in implementing these SDGs.

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Expanding the frontiers of connectivity



MILIA ALI

RECENTLY, Facebook membership crossed the two billion mark, making it the leading social media platform in cyberspace. For more than a decade Facebook

has made sure we know what our friends' babies look like, what our high school classmates think about politics or what kind of music is popular with our

noted that "it's important to give people a voice, to get a diversity of opinions out there, but on top of that, you also need to do this work of building common ground so that way we can all move forward together." Consequently, the company revised its mission statement: "To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." The new tool for achieving this objective is Facebook Groups. Creating a Group in Facebook for a specific cause is likely to generate synergies far beyond the random conversations that take place between

entertainment, in favour of purposeful and empowering communications for better understanding of issues is not only confined to the social media. It has also permeated into the world of fiction writing and creative arts. Recently, I happened to be at Arundhati Roy's book launch hosted by the "Politics and Prose" bookstore in Washington DC. When asked why she had waited two decades to publish her second novel, Roy's response was that it's not important to produce just a novel — there must be a purpose to even fiction writing. She expanded this idea in an

describes her fictional writing as: "A way of binding together worlds that have been ripped apart."

One could argue that it's unrealistic to expect that by connecting people through Facebook or by narrating stories about pain and suffering, hate and vitriol can be eliminated by love and acceptance. However, the shift toward defining a clear set of goals for our leisure activities, addresses a much broader question: should our idle mental pursuits have a "higher" purpose? Is it kosher to indulge in activities like interacting on Facebook, reading a novel or listening to music merely for pleasure? Many would say: "Why not? The realities of life are so overwhelmingly stressful that occasionally one does want to escape into the virtual world of Facebook or the surreal setting of a novel or a piece of art. The so called mindless pursuits make us happy, just like good wine or gourmet food."

The debate about "art for hedonistic pleasure or art for a greater cause" is ongoing and will continue. But there is broad consensus on one issue: a good work of art can connect you to your senses, not just your mind. In our fragmented world, it's important for people not only to comprehend adversity with their minds, but also to feel it emotionally and spiritually. This might motivate some of us to turn compassionate thinking into compassionate actions!

The jury is still out on the usefulness of activities that give us undiluted pleasure without a definitive purpose. However, here's my parting thought: By making citizens feel a part of the greater human family, by connecting people or "cyber tribes", Facebook, novels or any form of creative art can have a worthwhile impact on a divisive, untrusting, unstable and unpredictable world. I, for one, wait with bated breath to see if Zuckerberg's social revolution will indeed help generate more cohesiveness among people.

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peers. At a personal level, it has made each one of us "newsworthy" by enabling us to showcase our private lives in the public arena. Over time the Network has evolved, broadening its reach to rally support for protest movements like the Arab Spring, for generating pressure on industry giants to act ethically and to build a broad consensus on critical social issues.

One would think these are path-breaking achievements. However, Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, believes that connecting people online is not enough. In a CNN interview he

friends and acquaintances. The idea, it seems, is to establish a market place of common interests amongst users. This is especially significant at a time when trust in institutions, experts and leaders is at its nadir. People have more faith in their peers who are familiar with their problems and are thus more likely to be guided by them. Since Facebook is free it provides its users a level playing field with forces that can pay to lobby for their goals.

The change in thinking, away from casual and mundane interactions for

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interview: "It's not about imparting information, that's not what a novel is... For example, you can't explain just in evidence and footnotes and human rights reports the fear and terror that is in the air of Kashmir, what it means to people to have to live with this terror day and night, what a military occupation of 20 years becomes, when it seeps into the cellular structure of social life there. I think fiction can address it in ways that straightforward reportage cannot." Just as Zuckerberg aims to bring communities together through Facebook groups, Roy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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As only embers remain

On July 1, 2016, the core foundations of this country were rattled by an unspeakable tragedy that will haunt us for the rest of our lives. As events unfolded on that day, each new piece of information made us question ourselves. It was unimaginable to think that young men from well-off families could do such a thing. But we had to face the facts - the horrors that can manifest out of neglectful upbringing combined with the poisonous ideas that misled those troubled kids. However, their actions cannot solely be attributed to the parents. We, the young people, have to take care of our friends as well and keep them from going down a path of no return. It is only through understanding, compassion, and cooperation that we can prevent such a thing from happening in the future.

Shahrukh Ikhtear, Dhaka

Save Dhaka's ponds

Dhaka was at one time full of ponds that accommodated fishes, living organisms, and bathing children. But more and more of them are being filled up. It has taken us one more step away from clean, fresh air, healthy physical exertion and an idyllic place for leisure.

It is the responsibility of the government to save our natural environment. They must crack down on the miscreants who usurp the land illegally. They must protect the ponds and encourage tree plantation around the areas. The Daily Star has published several reports about landowners filling up ponds across the city. We hope that the government will pay heed to these reports and take immediate actions.

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