

SDG TARGETS

# Can we get there by 2030?

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THE title of this essay may raise a few eyebrows in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has already embraced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and there is no doubt that the government and civil society are marching ahead to reach the various targets. However, like all long marches, this journey too has many milestones, and possibly detours and roadblocks on the way; so it is imperative that all systems be checked periodically and mid-course corrections be made accordingly. And last, but not the least, it is fair to ask, are we embarking on a journey that is achievable and measurable?

A conference was recently organised in Washington, DC by South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) on July 12, 2017. I am referring to the SANEM-North America Discussion Forum 2017 "South Asia at a Development Crossroads" organised in collaboration with the World Bank Group and attended by distinguished economists, development specialists, and graduate students from major universities of North America. The keynote speaker at this session, Prof Selim Raihan, and others at the conference raised a key issue which is on all our minds: Is GDP growth sufficient to eliminate poverty, level income distribution and ensure equal opportunities by 2030 in countries of South Asia which face strong headwinds because of weak political institutions, entrenched socioeconomic forces, and the realities of age-old cultural values?

From the outset in 2016, three overarching challenges emerged for countries which signed on to the SDGs: prioritisation, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and financing. Much has been said about the serious shortfall in financing SDGs in Bangladesh. In a paper entitled *Financing of SDGs in Bangladesh*, Prof Bazlul Haque Khondker has shown the need to explore the various financing options with a clear-cut policy formulation. Are we ready for greater infusion of foreign direct investment (FDI)? Or offer further incentives to harness the energies of the private sector through various private-public partnership (PPP) projects?

Earlier this year, the Planning Commission published the results of a study to identify the roles and responsibilities of various ministries and divisions in the implementation of SDGs, as well as the shortcomings inherent in monitoring and evaluation of this undertaking. The study, *Data Gap Analysis of SDGs: Bangladesh Perspective*, reveals an interesting issue. The government and its agencies are still at a loss in terms of coming to agree on a



Bangladesh, like many other developing countries, needs to assess whether GDP growth is sufficient to eliminate poverty, address food security and ensure equal opportunities by 2030.

PHOTO: STAR

unifying theme to manage the "synergies" (targets that reinforce each other) as well as "trade-offs" (targets that conflict with each other) and "enablers" (targets that are preconditions for others).

Of the 241 indicators of SDGs, the Planning Commission study indicates that data related to 70 indicators (or 29 percent) is readily available and that of 63 (26 percent) is not available. Data for the remaining 108 (45 percent) is partially available. However, data gap for some of the SDGs is more acute than others. In terms of data gap, goal 12, "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns," ranks highest since 69 percent of data of indicators related to this goal is not currently available. This is followed by data gaps in measuring and monitoring goal 14, "Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources," and goal 13, "Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact." In view of these unmet needs, the government must soon outline a game plan to address the data gaps.

At the recent conference organised by International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI) at Harvard University in May 2017, speakers representing the government of Bangladesh were candid about another obstacle that we face. Of the 241 indicators, many will be left behind as we march ahead in the coming years. The most difficult task is to work with the stakeholders to zero in on the laggards and come to a consensus on the trade-offs between various goals and

targets. Who makes the decisions and what is the process? Is it just a technical exercise of costs and benefits, or a more inclusive process with consultations and participation of civil society?

The urgency and immediacy for dialogue in cases of "trade-offs" mentioned in the aforementioned GOB document are illustrated by the recent inconclusive national debate on the need for more power plants. The Rampal power plant brought this debate to the attention of the global sustainable development movement. But as Dr Farashuddin at a recent book launch at Policy Research Institute (PRI) openly asked, "Why should Bangladesh pay the price for the mistakes of other nations which contributed to global warming?" Should Bangladesh, as a country likely to be seriously impacted by climate change, also go the extra mile to explore renewable sources of energy? Can the developing countries of South Asia afford to bear the greater cost of cleaner energy?

The SDG Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office is entrusted to work with government agencies and civil society to prioritise the measures, as well as to track and monitor our progress. While some special programmes initiated by this or future governments will help us achieve some of the SDGs well in advance of 2030, others may need a boost in the coming years, and the Secretariat has a heavy burden to shoulder. Is the SDG Secretariat ready to work in identifying projects in partnership with NGOs or the private

sector? To adopt and adapt best practices in monitoring important goals (for example, elimination of poverty and inequality (goal 1), and set up a system to raise a "red flag" if we are not on track to achieve this goal)?

But these findings should not be a cause for alarm since Bangladesh is not alone as it stands at these crossroads. Fortunately, we can learn from other South Asian nations, and calibrate and fine-tune our policy steps as we move forward. And the potential gains from an action plan based on key SDG policy strategies that build upon the interrelationships between the goals and targets are significant. Results from a simulation study done for five South Asian countries by Prof Selim Raihan and others suggest that strategic policy priorities of sustained, broad-based and job-creating rapid economic growth through industry-oriented structural transformation, and addressing food security and hunger with agricultural productivity improvements through sustainable agriculture could lift an additional 71 million people out of poverty, create 56 million additional jobs in South Asia and boost GDP by 15-30 percent by 2030 over and above the business-as-usual scenario. However, for Bangladesh, this growth presupposes eight percent GDP growth and commensurate 20 percent increased investments in utilities, transport and social infrastructure. A pretty daunting task indeed!

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## Dredger purchase to take 10 years?

*Speaks of inefficiency and bad planning*

A report published by this paper on Thursday about a government project to make the country's waterways navigable within 10 years is a perfect example of how inefficiency and mismanagement can turn important projects stagnant. In 2010, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) was given the mandate and money to complete the dredging project within 2020. For this purpose, it was supposed to procure 21 dredgers by 2012; yet in the seven years that have passed, only five have been bought. After three extensions, now the BWDB is asking for a further three years, just to complete the procurement.

The project was conceived after a BIWTA report about the drastic shrinkage of the country's waterway network. Our river system carries almost a fifth of the world's annual silt flow, and therefore, to keep the rivers navigable and ease suffering of people living on the coasts, three crore cubic metres of dredging are required annually. That the government acted so fast and allocated Tk 1,309 crore for the project shows the importance it was given initially. Had the dredgers been purchased timely, we could dredge 2.21 crore cubic metres a year by now.

The BWDB officials have continued with the excuse of a slow tender process and non-responsiveness of bidders. Even if it were true, the last five years should have been enough to come up with a plan. That these excuses are flimsy at best is highlighted by the planning ministry's letter about 15 more BWDB supervised projects that have been behind schedule since 2010. When the money has been allocated, there should be no excuse for these unacceptable delays. The planning ministry should investigate the actual causes behind these delays and hold to account those responsible for it.

## Violence against women and children

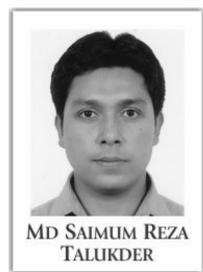
*Make examples of the perpetrators*

HARDLY a day goes by without reports of torture and oppression of women and children covering the main spaces of the media. A few days ago we had to suffer the shocking spectacle of a pregnant woman in Nilphamari tied to a tree and tortured until rescued by the police. Her fault was that she had refused an out-of-court settlement with the alleged killers of her father. And to add injury to the wound, the child she was carrying was aborted a day later because of the cruelty she had undergone. On Wednesday, an act of similar barbarity was perpetrated, in Kushtia, on a boy of seven who was also tied to a tree and mercilessly beaten up. He was suspected of stealing a mobile phone.

Regrettably, instances of violence against woman and children are occurring with distressing regularity. When one talks about society rising together against it, the stark reality is that in many cases the perpetrators are well-linked with the powerful which restrains the public from standing up to the culprits for fear of reprisal. Both these features were clearly evident in these two instances where in one the ruling party men were alleged to have been behind the torture of the woman. And in the second case people had refrained from intervening fearing reprisal since the alleged culprits were linked to the powerful, as was apparent from the lack of reaction and statements of the onlookers.

Some of the alleged culprits have been arrested and we hope that they would be subject to the legal process unaffected by any political influence. They should be tried in the special tribunals speedily so that not only do the victims get due justice, but also that the punishments work as deterrence.

# Reclaiming our privacy in the age of Big Data



MD SAIMUM REZA TALUKDER

IN this era of information and communication technology, "data" has become the new gold rush for both state actors (governments, law enforcement

agencies, intelligence, etc.) and non-state actors (corporations, multinational companies, individual hackers or hacker groups, terrorist organisations, etc.).

"Personal data" has become crucial for strategic security, maintaining public order, controlling social movements, outlining development policies, promotion and marketing of products, preventing crimes and so on. Our personal data is constantly being collected, copied, stored, and processed by these state and non-state actors (mentioned as "others" hereafter) according to their needs to which we do not always have access and ownership. This is how personal data has become the "holy grail" of "Big Data" at present. Big Data is a very large scale of data which contains almost all the data that can be found on the internet and collected through Internet of Things (IoT) (any digital device that is connected to the internet, such as mobile phone, smart watch, smart TV, CCTV camera, computer, GPS system, etc.).

The question is: Why should we be worried? We should worry because personal data collection is destroying our privacy; changing or influencing our behaviour; making us prone to identity theft; creating a digital divide; and perpetuating racism and discrimination. It is also making us enslaved to technological regulations while profiting

the data-hungry business entities and changing the values, ethics and cultures of societies.

One of the primary drivers of personal data collection is the pecuniary motivation behind it. According to a number of research studies, the value of one unit of a person's personal data is between USD 0.05-0.083; and the sum of personal data of a person is between USD 1000-3000. That is why the scale of collecting personal data has become so intense that it itself has become a very profitable industry. In 2012, it generated

our biometric data for national ID card is owned by the state. Our medical records and data on credit card expenditures are owned by hospitals and banks, respectively. Our behavioural patterns online are being analysed through data collected by web platforms such as Google, Yahoo, Amazon and eBay.

But it can be argued that when our personal data is in the hands of the state, it is even worse as it is collected under legal provisions giving an upper hand to the state; citizens do not always have an

effective remedy which can challenge a legal order for data collection. Moreover, the "others" analyse all this data through Artificial Intelligence (AI) and build "profiles" of people based on presumptions about their behaviours, personalities, likes and dislikes, movements, social interactions, lifestyle, previous records, etc. It is a cause for concern because AI is perpetuating discrimination and racism through its algorithms. Google's AI has been criticised for anti-Semitism and price

discrimination (different price for the same product based on the person's location). Algorithms of AI are manipulative and turning us into "engineered, passive and programmable people," making us more likely to supply profitable personal data without raising ethical questions and putting up resistance. Thus, to save whatever is left of our privacy, we need to claim ownership of our personal data. Because the right to privacy is a fundamental right. Personal data is our property and it must be secured and protected online just like any other constitutional right. We must demand for our personal data to be adequately protected, recognising it as a pre-condition for protecting the fundamental right to privacy and freedom. Nation states too must respect these rights despite legal orders of mass surveillance or wiretapping. Especially after the Snowden revelations, the rights-based approach of protecting data has become more important than ever.

In the context of Bangladesh, we need tech-neutral laws which will be capable of synchronisation with ICT changes. We urgently need a specialised data protection law. These laws need to acknowledge that all the fundamental constitutional rights ensured offline must be protected online as well. The definition of "privacy" has to be updated in our Constitution in line with data protection. Along with all these laws, our ICT policies must also acknowledge that data protection is a core element of our right to privacy which ultimately strengthens the democratic values of society. Above all, we, the people, must understand that our personal data belongs to us, not to anyone else.

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a whopping USD 156 billion in revenue.

The opportunity cost of personal information sale or leak is the compromise of our privacy. Through IoT, we are traceable and monitored round the clock. Starting from our smartphones, personal computers, and household gadgets connected to the internet, to surveillance cameras, ATMs, ID cards or credit cards swiped in card readers, our personal data is constantly being collected and stored—serving the vested interests of "others". For example

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Complete Moghbazar flyover project soon

The construction of the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover is one of the main causes of increased traffic jam in Moghbazar and nearby areas. The flyover was supposed to be active by 2014, but a significant portion of the project is yet to be completed.

Because of this people are facing unbearable miseries while travelling. There's mud, bricks, sand, pipes, and irons lying under the flyover. And it is mainly office-goers and students who are the worst sufferers. There are serious safety issues as well. A number of people—both workers and pedestrians—have died at the construction site.

The government needs to act fast to complete this project at the earliest and rebuild the roads near the flyover to ease traffic congestion and give the people some relief.

Mashuk Imam, East West University

### Curb the use of polythene bags and plastic bottles

Use of polythene bags and plastic bottles is rampant across the country because of their low cost. What is neglected in the process, however, is the serious impact on our environment. We need to remember that these are synthetic substances that do not decompose.

Polythene and plastic waste has also proved to be a huge menace to urban life. We have been experiencing severe waterlogging in most of the big cities partly due to such excessive waste.

To curb the use of polythene bags and plastic bottles, the government should promote jute bags and take up awareness campaigns to make citizens more conscious of the use of such materials that are harmful to the environment.

Mohammad Zonae Emran, By email