

# Battling poverty today and further down the road



**THE OVERTON WINDOW**  
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

A government survey report made public on October 17 confirmed what has been suspected for some time now; that the poor's share in the national income decreased in the past six years, while the richer segment of the population's increased.

Whereas the poorest five percent had 0.78 percent of the national income in their possession back in 2010, it has now been reduced to a meagre 0.23 percent. The richest five percent, in contrast, increased their share of the national income to 27.89 percent from 24.61 percent only six years back, showing, as the report noted, that inequality in terms of wealth accumulation between the rich and the poor has increased over this period quite substantially.

But an even bigger concern is the slowdown in the rate of poverty reduction which the report highlights. Especially, as this happened over a period when Bangladesh maintained an exceptionally high GDP (gross domestic product) growth rate. Because what this indicates is that the fruits of this growth have disproportionately gone to the richer sections of the population compared to the poorer ones and, most importantly, that the state's policies in addressing income inequality over the years have also failed miserably. Yet, if we are to believe the finance minister's latest assurance delivered at an international seminar in New York, Bangladesh is set to eradicate poverty by the year 2024!

However, once rhetoric is pushed aside and such a prospect is looked at objectively, what has to be admitted is, for that to truly transpire, substantial changes must be made in governance and that too urgently. Besides that, the government also needs to implement better policies and be more focused on some key areas that can quicken the rate of poverty reduction.

According to Dr Akhter Ahmed, who leads the operation of Washington-based think tank International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Bangladesh, these areas of focus should include accelerating farm sector growth, shifting the "pure tenants" (the landless people) to more skilled areas of



PHOTO: COURTESY

**If the aim is to remove poverty in the long run, the government must focus on the structural dimensions of poverty and inequality.**

production and increasing investment in farm research and development. And this makes good sense, as according to a joint study by Brac and the UK's Department for International Development, the agricultural sector is three times as effective as non-agricultural sectors when it comes to reducing poverty—a 1 percent increase in agricultural income reduced poverty by 0.39 percent, in comparison to a decrease in poverty by only 0.11 percent when there is a 1 percent rise in non-agricultural incomes.

Today, however, the agricultural sector faces some major challenges that include, but are

not restricted to, scarcity of surface water for irrigation, a decline in groundwater level, arsenic pollution, etc., and is becoming increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters such as the floods that have recently swept across South Asia, causing immense damage to this year's crops here in Bangladesh. All the more reason for the government to support agricultural productivity, even more at this juncture, particularly given that it can be such an effective tool in reducing poverty and ensuring the nation's food security all at the same time.

Simultaneously, it is important not to

forget the 2.5 million households in Bangladesh that currently live in extreme poverty. These people are in need of immediate assistance, and the only way to ensure their well-being is through social safety-net programmes, at least until they can be provided with some stable means of earning a regular income.

In that regard, one of the major problems that we face is that the beneficiaries of such programmes often end up being those other than the ultra-poor. In other words, because of widespread corruption in most government aid programmes, resources meant for the poor

are frequently diverted elsewhere. This is a concern that even the current Anti-Corruption Commission Chairman Iqbal Mahmood expressed in a recent interview with *The Daily Star*, saying that "many of the sufferers" of corruption "are those who are poor" (Lack of actionable evidence biggest barrier to prosecuting influential, October 19).

And that, "It is the people in rural areas that are often the worst hit by corruption," which should most oblige the government to focus on thwarting graft as its victims are those who are already the worst sufferers and, hence, are in most desperate need of government assistance (as opposed to encumbrance).

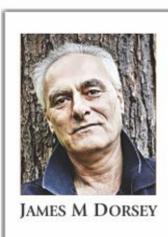
However, providing such assistance cannot be a long-term solution. If the aim is to remove poverty in the long run, the government must focus on the structural dimensions of poverty and inequality. According to Rehman Sobhan, the chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue, "The poor are embedded in certain inherited structural arrangements such as insufficient access to productive assets as well as human resources, unequal capacity to participate in both domestic and global markets and undemocratic access to political power. These structural features of inequality reinforce each other to effectively exclude the poor from participating in the benefits of development or the opportunities provided by more open markets."

So, to eradicate poverty and inequality, the government must address their root causes, rather than just their symptoms. This means that the government must allow for and expand "the ownership and control of the resource pool over productive assets," strengthen "the capacity of the poor to compete in the market place," democratise "their access to a knowledge based society," redesign "budgetary policy to reach public resources directly to the poor," restructure "monetary policy to deliver credit and provide savings instruments to the poor," design "institutions for collective action by the poor" and "politically empower" them.

Otherwise, not only is Bangladesh likely to fail in its endeavour to eradicate poverty by 2024, but poverty also will continue to haunt the nation further down the road.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

# Gulf crisis broadens definitions of food security



JAMES M DORSEY

FOOD security has taken on a new dimension almost five months into the Gulf crisis that pits a UAE-Saudi alliance against Qatar and for which there is no resolution in sight. The UAE and Saudi Arabia would deny that they are

attempting to starve Qatar into submission with their diplomatic and economic boycott that has forced Qatar to seek alternative food suppliers and alternative air and sea shipment routes. Yet, de facto, their strategy is to drive the cost of Qatari food and other imports up to the point that the wealthy Gulf state no longer can afford the more expensive imports.

In the process, the boycott has redefined the national security aspects of food security, particularly for small states that are more vulnerable to external pressures.

Food security amounted for the Gulf states in the first decade of the 21st century to ensuring access in a global market in which shortages were driving up prices. The Gulf states responded to the food crises and massive price hikes in 2007-2008 and in 2010-2011 by following in the footsteps of China, South Korea and Europe and acquiring huge tracts of agricultural land in Asia and Africa.

Ironically, high oil prices were one driver of the increased cost of food that prompted some exporters in Africa and Asia, confronted with domestic shortages, to restrict exports. The restrictions were what prompted the Gulf

states to go on their land acquisition binge.

At the time, food security was for cash-rich but soil-poor Gulf states a question of market supply and demand and ensuring the food supply chain at whatever price. That narrow definition first changed with the popular Arab revolts in 2011 that toppled long-standing autocrats and sparked civil wars and a counterrevolution. Some of those revolts, like in Syria, which started as a peaceful protest in demand of change before it deteriorated into a catastrophic civil war, were prompted in part by droughts that effected the agricultural economy.

With the revolts, food security took on a far greater domestic security aspect for autocratic Gulf leaders whose legitimacy was rooted in a social contract that promised a cradle-to-grave subsidised welfare state in exchange for surrender of all political rights.

The Gulf crisis, however, has taken the dimensions of food security for the Gulf as well as small states elsewhere to a new level. Food security no longer is primarily about commercial access or preferred access to world markets at times of shortages and rising prices. Control of agricultural resources in far-flung lands no longer provides necessary levels of security. The Gulf crisis has broadened the aim of food security, particularly for small states, to include a diversified supply, guaranteed shipping routes, and self-sufficiency to the degree possible as a means of defence against attempts to starve a small state into submission.

The defence and security as opposed to market aspects of food have taken on additional significance not only because of



PHOTO: ADB

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Qatar's need to fend off pressure on its food supplies by neighbours determined to undermine its independence and force it to adhere to policies devised in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh rather than Doha.

The most recent joint agricultural outlook of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) for the next ten years suggests that the food crises of the first decade of the 21st century are for now a thing of the past. "Prices for the main crops, livestock and fish

products all fell in 2015, signalling that an era of high prices is quite likely over for all sub-sectors," the outlook said.

Food security is at the core of Qatar's ability to resist UAE-Saudi pressure. Its continued capability to do so will likely define perceptions of margins of manoeuvrability that small states have in relationship to big brothers. "It sometimes takes war or the threat of war to make countries look at their food security," John Dore, an Irishman who is helping Qatar become self-sufficient in dairy products,

told *The Guardian*.

To compensate for the effects of the UAE-Saudi blocking of land, sea and air routes, Qatar initially shifted the bulk of its dairy imports from Saudi Arabia to Turkey and Iran. Trade between Qatar and Iran has increased by 60 percent since the imposition of the boycott in early June.

Importing thousands of cows from Europe and the United States, Mr Dore's operation, within a matter of months, has been able to supply up to 40 percent of Qatar's milk needs. He expects that the import of another 10,000 animals over the next year will make Qatar self-sufficient.

To be sure, Qatar's enormous wealth gave it a leg up in its ability to fund resilience and its refusal to cave into the demands of its bigger brothers. In doing so, it relied not only on its financial muscle but also on the relationships and dependencies it established by diversifying the client base for its liquified natural gas.

Nonetheless, the long and short of Qatar's fight is that how the battle in the Gulf unfolds and how the crisis is resolved will likely have far-reaching consequences for definitions of food security, priorities in shaping food security strategies, and the architecture of international relations as small states gain confidence, recognising that size is no longer the only or main factor that determines their ability to chart an independent course.

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**A WORD** **A DAY**

**VEPERTINE**  
ADJECTIVE

Relating to, occurring, or active in the evening.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 30 Summer quaff
- 31 Singer Tillis
- 1 Frame
- 6 Monster
- 11 Origami creation
- 12 Part player
- 13 Words to a hitcher
- 14 "Oh boy!"
- 15 Paper worker
- 17 Radio's Glass
- 18 Chess pieces
- 19 Olympics racer
- 22 Twisty turn
- 23 Basic need
- 24 Like ghost stories
- 25 Even
- 27 Wall St. debut

**DOWN**

- 1 Plot
- 2 Wears down
- 3 Easy putts
- 4 Hand or foot
- 5 Maine town
- 6 Cove
- 7 Earth-friendly prefix
- 8 When one wishes
- 9 Evening do
- 10 Tire feature
- 16 Turned
- 20 Maine town
- 21 Mole, e.g.
- 24 Lawn material
- 25 Uncommon
- 26 Threat
- 27 Gazelle's cousin
- 28 Annoys
- 29 Senior
- 30 Figure of speech
- 34 Jason's ship
- 36 Chiding sound
- 37 Hosp. sections

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

A	L	I	C	E	R	O	A	S	T
B	E	L	L	I	E	N	S	U	E
S	O	L	A	R	P	E	E	L	S
U	S	E	S	T	A	U	T		
C	A	M	P	I	B	I	S		
A	M	I	P	R	O	M	O	T	E
G	E	N	I	E	G	E	N	O	A
E	R	A	S	E	R	S	I	O	S
T	O	R	O	N	L	Y			
T	A	I	L	W	A	S	H		
A	R	O	A	R	S	C	E	N	E
P	I	N	T	O	S	T	A	L	E
E	A	S	E	D	A	R	L	E	S

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

MY NEW RULE IS NO PETS IN THE OFFICE. OTTO'S NOT A PET, SIR. GREG+MORT WALKER. HE'S ALL DOG! ACTUALLY, SARGE IS MY PET!

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

SIGH: I WISH THE KIDS WOULD ASK ME MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE. YEAH, I MEAN, THEY COULD BE BENEFITTING FROM MY WISDOM AND YEARS OF LIFE EXPERIENCE. I TOTALLY AGREE... AND YOUR FLY IS OPEN, O WISE ONE.