

# Smart priorities for the new government's first budget



BJORN LOMBERG

**S**INCE 2015, Copenhagen Consensus and BRAC have collaborated on Bangladesh Priorities to create a bridge between policy and research. This is driven by the belief that, with limited resources and

time, it is crucial that decisions are informed by what will do the most good for each taka spent.

More than 1,100 pages of new research were written for Bangladesh Priorities by economists from Bangladesh, the region and the world, identifying the costs and benefits of 76 policy interventions under the 7th Plan. This research shows exactly how much each option costs all of society, and exactly what we get in return.

The benefit-cost analysis was widely acclaimed by economists, highly appreciated by the government, and is contributing directly to new plans and policies.

In the Bangladesh Priorities 2.0 (2018-2019) research exercise, we have gone much further and deeper in analysing four interventions from those 76 policy options: e-Government Procurement (e-GP), e-Mutation or land records digitisation, services through Union Digital Centres (UDCs), and village courts.

All four were among the priorities identified among the 76 policy options for Bangladesh by an eminent panel including a Nobel laureate, for having the potential to achieve vast benefits for Bangladesh.

The deeper analysis includes a political economy study to reveal the constraints inhibiting scale-up of the four key interventions, which are all priorities of the 7th Plan.

Scaling up e-GP would mean better spending of the Tk 72,000 crore that the government spends each year on everything from Padma Bridge to pencils in government offices.

At present, the e-GP system has reached 50 percent of its intended usage level and it is generating Tk 400 of benefit for each taka that has been spent so far. The new evidence reveals that if scaled up, e-GP can generate Tk 755 for each taka spent. Such returns are anticipated as a result of increased competition and transparency.

Based on these findings, we encourage the government to allocate resources to motivate e-GP use under a whole-of-government approach in the Budget FY2019-20.

Prioritising implementation of the Electronic Contract Management System (e-CMS) would ensure bidders are using quality inputs and delivering tendered outputs on time.

The Eminent Panel ranked land records digitisation as a high priority because electronic records can make transfers simpler and reduce corruption. Moreover, it increases the security of property rights, which increases investments and will make the economy grow even faster in Bangladesh.

The government has made commendable progress towards digitising the mutation

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or *khatiyon* records system. It appears there has been an increase in transparency and accountability under e-Mutation as a result of SMS notification and the tracking number, but loopholes still exist.

The new evidence shows that at present there is still no positive return from e-Mutation investment. This is because of low utilisation. It is encouraging that the government has committed to implement the e-Mutation system across all upazila offices by June.

If e-Mutation is scaled up across all upazila offices, our research suggests a return of Tk 6 for each taka spent. Adding the spillover effects toward economic growth suggests a phenomenal return of Tk 619 of benefits for every taka spent.

Therefore, we also urge scaling up e-Mutation across all upazilas as part of Budget FY2019-20. This would include development and implementation of the

Land Information Service Framework being designed by the Cabinet Division.

UDCs are seen as a hallmark achievement of the government's Digital Bangladesh vision. These one-stop shops are making service delivery processes easier for rural citizens.

Our new research evidence reveals that for each taka spent, UDCs are generating two takas of social benefits from delivering three services: online birth registration, exam registration and social safety net programme (SSNP). Scaling up the last of these using the civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system could increase the social benefits to Tk 3 for every taka spent.

Based on this research, we urge the government to consider spending money on behavioural change communication programmes to keep UDC entrepreneurs socially motivated and bureaucrats

administratively focused on serving rural citizens.

An important point for future analysis is UDC data availability. A Digital Centre Management System (DCMS) needs to be made publicly accessible and used for identifying demand-driven services. And a census of UDCs is required before the government drafts the eighth five-year plan.

Finally, we have studied the empowerment of village courts. At present, the village court system generates Tk 2 of social benefit for each taka spent, and manages to partly reduce the backlog of cases in district courts.

Empowering village courts as a quasi-formal justice system to deal with many more complicated and higher value cases could benefit Bangladesh tremendously. This would generate nearly Tk 19 of benefit for each taka spent because of the far more significant backlog reduction, and because it would make it more convenient for a village-level petitioner to access justice, without having to travel to district courts.

UP chairpersons need to carry out electoral duties, hindering performance of village courts. Based on this analysis, we suggest that Budget FY2019-20 prioritises training all UP personnel responsible for village courts and introducing measures that boost performance, such as the transfer of authority to other representatives when the UP chairperson is not available.

We hope that, as with past Bangladesh Priorities findings, the new research on these four key priorities will receive attention from the newly elected government as it studies its first budget. Each is critical to promoting good governance, economic growth and public welfare, and we commend the Planning Minister for his commitment to scaling up these priorities.

In the belief that all of Bangladesh is helped when the policymaking and decision process is more evidence-driven, we will continue to develop the policy-research bridge.

Bjorn Lomborg is President of the Copenhagen Consensus Center and Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# A Life in Solidarity



IRENA GRUZZINSKA GROSS

**T**HERE are very few people whose death can mark the end of an era. Karol Modzelewski was one of them. A historian and founding member of the Polish trade union Solidarity, Modzelewski died

on April 28 in a Warsaw hospital. Sadly, he leaves behind a country in the grips of a populist government whose accession to power might have been averted if his own earlier warnings had been heeded.

Modzelewski was what the philosopher Hannah Arendt would call an actor—both a “doer” and a “sufferer”—in many of the key political movements of the last 80 years. His life could fill at least one chapter in any European history textbook.

He was born as Kirill Budniewicz in Moscow at the height of Stalin's Great Purge, which took both his maternal grandfather and father. His Jewish-Russian mother later married the Polish communist Zygmunt Modzelewski, whom she fought alongside in World War II while little Kirill sheltered with other children.

In 1945, Modzelewski was brought to Poland, where he received his new name, along with a new alphabet and culture. Though a transplant, he was not out of place in a time of mass migration. By the time he was nine, he had become a Pole.

He got his first real taste of political activism just 10 years later, during the de-Stalinisation period. Charismatic, handsome, and extremely intelligent, he



KAROL MODZELEWSKI

PHOTO: EPA

was also a great orator, and commanded the stage at rally after rally. After participating in the mass protests against Poland's communist government in 1956, he was disillusioned by the subsequent lack of change. In 1964, he joined another young leader, Jacek Kuron, in publishing an “Open Letter to the Party,” criticising the system from the left. The move immediately landed both men in prison.

The release of Modzelewski and Kuron in 1967 came just in time for them to lead the mass student demonstrations in

Poland that year. That got them sent back to prison, but by this time, their “Open Letter” had been read widely in the West. When asked to identify himself before a Paris judge, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the French student activist leaders of *les événements de mai* 1968, replied: “Kuron-Modzelewski.”

During his second imprisonment, Modzelewski returned to studying history, and devoted himself fully to the discipline after his release in 1971. He became an established authority on medieval Europe,

and the author of books that Russian, French, and Italian historians regard as classics.

But twentieth-century history wasn't through with Modzelewski. His academic work was soon interrupted by the mass labour strikes of August 1980. Playing the role of doer and sufferer once again, Modzelewski furnished the incipient Solidarity movement with its name. Yet, as always, his main political concern was with egalitarianism, and he was soon marginalised within the movement. After the Polish government cracked down and declared martial law in December 1981, he found himself in prison once again.

The partly free election in June 1989 marked the beginning of the end of communist rule in Poland—and in Eastern Europe generally. Modzelewski was still doggedly pursuing his study of history, but so exhilarating was the political moment that he could not stay away. He was elected as a senator in the new parliament, where he supported left-wing parties. That made him a relic of the past for Poland's post-communist political leaders, who had no time for humanistic intellectuals. With Central and Eastern Europe's political landscape undergoing rapid change, they looked to Western Europe and the United States for a new model. Private property would become the guarantor of freedom, and inequality would be tolerated as a necessary price to pay.

When Modzelewski spoke out against the liquidation of the industrial labour force, cuts to the welfare state, and the general disdain of the capitalist political class for those left behind, he was dismissed as a hopeless romantic. His

warnings now seem prescient, given the changing political mood of the past few years. The chauvinistic nationalism now ascendant in Poland, the US, and other Western democracies is the collateral damage of a political era that prized free markets over free people.

Modzelewski was an old-fashioned public intellectual, devoted to the life of the mind and to practical politics in the name of social justice. If I sound sympathetic to that way of being in the world, it is because I learned it from Modzelewski himself. I was among the students waiting anxiously for his and Kuron's release from prison in 1967. We felt called to rebel, but we needed leaders who were prominent public personae, rather than professional politicians. The activist Kuron and the intellectual Modzelewski made for a perfect team of mentors.

In the end, the long, periodic stints in prison wrought havoc on both men's health. Kuron died in 2004, and now the world has lost Modzelewski, too. I was lucky enough to spend a few days with him and his wife last spring in Turin, where we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1968 revolts. I remember discussing his excellent autobiography and thinking, that in his life, there was nothing of which to be ashamed. It was an honourable life, and when he died, he must have been at ease.

Irena Grudzinska Gross, a 2018 Fellow at the Guggenheim Foundation, is the author of *Golden Harvest* (with Jan T. Gross), *Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets and The Scar of Revolution: Custine, Tocqueville, and the Romantic Imagination*. She is working on a biography of Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**EE CUMMINGS**  
(1894–1962)  
AMERICAN POET, PAINTER, ESSAYIST AND AUTHOR

*To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1 Overlook  
5 Predictably trite  
10 Poker payment  
11 Lesson givers  
12 Checkout  
act  
13 Revolted  
14 Pamphlet  
16 Like some hot dogs  
20 Dozen for Hercules  
23 “Lenore” writer  
24 Earlier, quaintly  
25 Goethe character  
27 Chinese chairman  
28 Examines sentences

29 Comfy seat  
32 Quads strength-eners  
36 Wear roughly  
39 Small bottle  
40 Plug parts  
41 Choir voice  
42 Police ID  
43 Spring

**DOWN**

1 Prepare potatoes  
2 Cuzco native  
3 Jazz's Getz  
4 Summon  
5 Constructed  
6 Island ring  
7 “Only kidding!”  
8 Common verb

9 Hallucinatory drug  
11 Singing groups  
15 Tedious fellow  
17 Creative work  
18 Face feature  
19 Obtains  
20 Eastern monk  
21 Miles off  
22 Cannon sound  
25 Give out  
26 Airport announcement  
28 Book makeup  
30 Trolley sound  
31 Yard border  
33 Do a clerical job  
34 “Toodleoo!”  
35 Spill over  
36 LAPD alert  
37 Lingerie item  
38 Piston connector

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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DAY... AND I'M STUCK INSIDE  
WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO BE OUT THERE?  
THIS IS GREAT UNTIL HE REALIZES WHAT HE SAID!

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

MOM! WHEN DID YOU TAKE MY UNICORN?  
MINE!!  
MINE!!  
I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU'RE FEELING GENEROUS TODAY?  
MINE! MINE! MINE!  
I DEMAND JUSTICE!

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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