

Foreign aid utilisation still unsatisfactory

We must increase our absorption capacity

At the end of the last fiscal year, foreign aid in the pipeline to Bangladesh went up to a record high USD 48.11 billion. Fresh commitments amounted to USD 9.8 billion, and although the government managed to spend USD 6.2 billion out of that—the highest ever—it still fell short of its USD 7.5 billion spending target.

Data from previous years shows that the same thing has been happening over and over again, which cannot be a mere coincidence. Clearly, there are some systemic problems that are hindering our ability to utilise foreign aid according to the government's own established targets, including delays in project approval, appointment of project staffers, contract approvals, etc. Additionally, it seems we do not have the capacity to fully absorb the funds that are coming in from abroad, which on the one hand is causing us to fall short of the spending target every year and, on the other, could eventually frustrate foreign donors as well as lead to unoptimised use of resources. Weak capacity of implementing agencies, coordination issues with the Planning Commission, procurement delays, etc., have been identified as some of the factors that hamper implementation and slow down fund disbursements. Yet, very little progress appears to have been made to rectify these problems.

With our economy growing rapidly, foreign donors have shown greater interest to invest in Bangladesh. Whereas yearly aid commitments used to be around USD 1 billion to USD 2 billion before FY2009-2010, it has risen to more than USD 5 billion since then, giving Bangladesh a much-needed financial boost. In order to make better use of that, the government needs to increase our aid absorption capacity and do so at a much faster rate than what we have seen in recent years.

Land-grabbing in CHT must stop

Save homesteads of indigenous people

It is an irony made possible by the nexus of money and political links that three tribal villages in the Bandarban district of the CHT are in the process of being grabbed and its inhabitants facing the prospect of eviction. Not only that, they are also facing charges of trespassing into what has legally been their abode for generations. And it is not the three villages only but the adjacent lands also that the indigenous people use to farm for sustenance that have been grabbed illegally. The grabber resorted to usury and then forcefully grabbed the land of those who defaulted in repaying the loan.

Reportedly, the actual amount of the so-called purchased land is three times the 60 acres that the so-called buyer says he has purchased. And he makes no secret of the fact that he faked documents to grab jhum lands, shamefacedly suggesting that faking documents to purchase lands in the hill districts is a common practice—all for the purpose of building a resort and a five-star hotel. In fact, since the signing of the CHT Accord, quite a few such villages have been denuded of their original inhabitants to make room for tourist resorts.

There are several stark questions that the administration and those connected with giving clearance of the sale of the lands in question must answer. How can people get away with using fake documents to buy land? And how can a person who is neither a permanent habitant nor a non-permanent resident purchase lands amounting to hundreds of acres? Is it not for the administration to ensure that the provisions of the relevant international protocols regarding protection of tribal lands are not breached?

We feel that there is a very fundamental issue that ought to be addressed here. Can we really afford to decimate the ecological environment of the CHT in the name of development and haphazard construction for tourism? By all means, the CHT should be opened to the world but that should not be at the expense of the pristine beauty of the region nor of the rights of indigenous people who, due to these developments, stand to lose their homes and means of sustenance.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Raising environmental consciousness early on in life

Low-lying Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries when it comes to the impacts of climate change. In the coastal areas, people undertake adaptive strategies frequently to tackle the risks and threats they face. A lot of people in the rural areas are not even aware about the climate risks. This ignorance is dangerous and should not be allowed to persist given the major climatic threats looming over us.

Schools across the country should design courses pertaining to environmental awareness so that the future generation acts responsibly towards the environment. In order to improve our situation, people have to get into the habit of practising environment-conscious behaviour, which should be developed since childhood.

School-goers should be taught about the repercussions of global warming, risk management, adaptation and ways of mitigating the effects of climate change. Students need to be taught to be more proactive about cleaning their surroundings, avoiding single-use plastic materials, reducing electricity and water wastage, and planting more trees.

Here, concerted efforts of parents, teachers, educational policymakers, and the government are needed. And the most important step would be to include environmental science and awareness subjects in the academic curricula in primary schools.

Md Ariful Islam, University of Barishal

MIDWIFERY EDUCATION IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The hurdles along the way

MUSHTAQUE CHOWDHURY and SELINA AMIN

AMONG many bold initiatives taken by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, introducing midwifery in Bangladesh's health system is one of the most significant ones. The country did well in terms of reducing maternal mortality during the MDG era, but latest research reports of a stall in its further progress.

Between 2010 and 2016, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) showed no further improvement. For the development agenda in the health sector to succeed, promotion of midwifery as an independent profession is the right step. Over the past few years, contributions have been made to further this agenda. A three-year diploma programme—designed according to international standards—was introduced in 38 government training centres and 17 private institutes from January 2013. As of now, 2,131 graduate midwives have earned midwifery licenses through examinations conducted by the Bangladesh Nursing and Midwifery Council (BNMC). Almost all of the licensed midwives are currently employed either in the government or in the private sector, while many are also serving in the Rohingya camps.

The non-governmental sector also came forward to supplement the efforts of the government in training midwives and promoting the midwifery profession. These institutes, which are located in many disadvantaged corners of the country, have already earned a reputation in providing quality education and have produced 461 licensed midwives so far. As a matter of fact, the midwife who topped the latest nationally conducted licensing examination came from one such institute. Unfortunately, there are a few issues and constraints for which midwifery institutes in the private sector are suffering to a large extent.

An order from the High Court has put a stay on the licensing exam that was supposed to take place last February.

Midwifery is a relatively new profession in Bangladesh. There is hardly any specially trained faculty available in the country. The initial need is being met by recruiting nurses who receive only the basic orientation on midwifery during their nursing education. Some institutions are employing their own-trained diploma-holding midwives as junior faculty as a stopgap measure.

This would not have been an issue if the government had agreed on the curricula for a BSc programme in midwifery. Allowing universities to



The non-governmental sector also came forward to supplement the efforts of the government in training midwives and promoting the midwifery profession.

introduce undergraduate programmes on midwifery would solve the faculty shortage issue at least in the short term. Moreover, it is learnt that the government is proposing a two-year bridging BSc for graduated midwives with diplomas. But it would be unfair to them because they are spending three intensive years of learning after their HSC to complete the diploma. Hence they should be allowed to do it in just one year. This is the standard practice in many other countries which Bangladesh should also follow. In addition, the government should encourage universities, both public and private, to develop and run full-length four-year undergraduate courses on midwifery. The latter will help establish midwifery as an independent profession along with meeting the faculty shortage problem.

Another hurdle for the private sector investors is the huge amount of money they are asked to deposit to open a midwifery institution—a sum of Tk 25 lakh as a deposit. This, along

with a 30,000 square ft floor space and ensuring residential facilities with an ability to accommodate all students, are unnecessary demands that should not be imposed. These demands will discourage many entrepreneurs from establishing any such institute. Besides, no other institution is enforced to meet such prerequisites. An equivalent nursing institute, for example, needs only Tk 15 lakh as a deposit.

Some of the existing private midwifery institutions are already facing severe resource constraints because their only source of revenue is the tuition fee. Charging higher fees is also not an option due to the average financial ability of the commoners. So, the government should consider subsidising the private midwifery institutes rather than subjecting them to these restricting rules.

Last but not least, a recent government decision to hold a centralised admission exam for all students entering midwifery programmes in both public and private sectors is a discriminatory act against

private institutes. As the government's own institutes offer diplomas free of cost, all the top-notch candidates naturally tend to join government institutes. So, private institutes are left with those in the bottom of the list. This is not fair and the government should allow the private institutes to recruit students directly.

The government's initiatives in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be at risk if the private sector is unable to deliver to their best extent. The midwifery education programme is a good example in this respect. The private sector institutes have proved their worth in training competent midwives and it would be a missed opportunity if we don't make the best use of it. The government should come forward and remove all the obstacles and bottlenecks faced by these institutes so that this commendable and critical step of theirs is not compromised.

Mushtaque Chowdhury and Selina Amin are, respectively, adviser and director of the Developing Midwives Project at BRAC University James P Grant School of Public Health.

New chapter emerging as East meets West again



WARREN FERNANDEZ

AND so we have come to the end of the End of History.

Remember Francis Fukuyama? He was the American professor who declared in a book of that title, *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the ferocious competition of political "isms"—capitalism, socialism, communism, fascism—which so plagued the world and ravaged societies for much of the 20th

century was over, with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.

Liberal democracy had triumphed. Mankind had reached the final stage of socio-political evolution, with political and economic liberalism as the ultimate system for governing modern societies. That triumphalist view, however, is now dead. Globalisation is in retreat. Nationalism, populism, nativism, and religious fundamentalism are on the march.

Indeed, *Financial Times* columnist Rana Foroohar recently cited a study by the Swiss Economic Institute that showed "globalisation peaked and began plateauing several years before the current trade wars began." It also stated: "The current headwinds to it—from lower cross-border capital spending to the localisation of supply chains due to populism, tariffs and the push for national champions—are not going away anytime soon."

Significantly, as the *New York Times* reported last week, Chinese investment in the US has plummeted nearly 90 percent since President Donald Trump took office. The fall, it said, reflected a growing distrust and how "world's two largest economies are beginning to decouple after years of increasing integration."

The implications of all of this are enormous and ominous. A world split into halves, with technology and trade, people and ideas, unable to flow freely, will not only be the poorer for it, but also more fractious and less stable. The youth of today will have to brace themselves for a very different geopolitical reality.

This grim backdrop set the stage for a public forum I chaired last Wednesday, titled "Wisdom of the East and West: A global future". Singapore's former Foreign Minister George Yeo, citing a line from British poet Rudyard Kipling, noted that while East will be east and West will be west, "the twin is now meeting again, and creating a new chapter in history."

Turning to China, he said he did not believe that it wished to be like the West, especially the United States, exporting its values and political system everywhere. China was one of the most homogeneous societies in history, and wished to keep it that way. It, therefore, feared contact with foreigners, as "the outside world can cause them to lose control." So while it was ready to associate with them as outsiders, this has long been done through "portals and outposts", with outsiders never quite accepted as "one of us".

In contrast, he cited the example of how, as an alumnus of Harvard University, he was entitled to vote, or even stand for election, for key positions to help shape its future. It was inconceivable, he said,

that universities in Beijing—or even Singapore, for that matter—would allow foreigners to play such a role. Similarly, he doubted that China's capital markets would ever be opened fully to the world, for fear of losing internal control.

These contrasting world views between East and West reflected their differing cultures and past experiences, which were never going to converge around a simplistic end of history norm.

Joining in this discussion, Harvard Professor of Chinese History Michael Puett said that the grandiose talk of a "globalised" world reflected the hubris of his generation, which had concluded that the end of the

went unheeded, from rising economic inequality to global warming. The result, he said, was predictable: a populist backlash to stagnating incomes and widening economic disparities at home, and challenges from countries abroad which did not feel their interests or cultures were reflected in the so-called globalised order.

He posed this challenge to the youth in the audience: Build a better, more cosmopolitan global future, drawing on the rich diversity of ideas and wisdoms from East and West. To do so, they would have to grapple with the big questions of their time, and they had to do so urgently, given the many pressing challenges now looming.

The big ideas in these two speeches sparked some big questions in my mind. So, as moderator, I posed them: how might the conflicting world views be prevented from degenerating into a "clash of civilisations", as another Harvard man, Prof Samuel Huntington, had famously warned about? Worse, are these two powers "destined for war", as the title of the best-selling book by Harvard Professor Graham Allison has stated darkly? In it, he argued that, a rising power such as China inevitably stokes anxiety in an incumbent one, like the US, thereby making a conflict likely.

Yet, to be fair, I pointed out that when I had met Prof Allison in Harvard in March, he was at pains to say that his book was by no means predicting a war to come. Rather, he was seeking ways to avert a conflict by preventing a historical pattern repeating itself, he said. As an alternative way forward, he pointed to the Chanyuan Treaty of 1005, when China's Song dynasty leaders made a pact with their neighbours, the Liao tribe, pledging to be "rivalry partners". Or, in today's parlance, "frenemies".

Both Mr Yeo and Prof Puett said they shared this view, and suggested that the US and China should find ways to work together, and by doing so, build relations and trust. As an example, Mr Yeo noted how China had congratulated India on the successful launch of the Chandrayaan-2 mission to the moon last week, adding that it was ready to work with New Delhi to explore outer space.

Other countries should give such collaborations a nudge, by stepping up to also contribute in whatever ways they could, he said.

Indeed, I would go further to argue that with the world marking the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 lunar landing in July 1969, rather than countries rushing to outdo each other to return to the moon, a joint "moonshot" mission into space would represent a much greater "giant leap for mankind". Besides, as Prof Puett went on to add, there is no shortage of challenges that China and the US, could—and should—work on together, not least the clear and present danger posed by climate change, now wreaking havoc around the world.

"There must be a humility to see in the other person an identity with as old a history as my own, which has its good points and its own wisdom, and from which I can learn. Then, we will have a better world," said Mr Yeo.

Warren Fernandez is Editor-in-Chief, *The Straits Times*, Singapore.

This article is part of a new series of the Asian Editors Circle, a weekly commentary by editors from the Asia News Network (ANN), which will be published by members of the regional media group. The ANN is an alliance of 24 news media titles across the region.



Cold War was not just a significant political moment, but rather marked the end of history—or contest of political ideas—for all time. This view, he lamented, was "horribly ethnocentric". For it assumed that the political values and systems prevailing in the US, which had emerged then as the dominant hyper power, was the perfect way to organise societies across the globe.

The new "global" world would be one connected by technology, from the likes of Apple, Google and Facebook, and underpinned by the neo-liberal belief in the free flow of goods, information, people and ideas.

This gave rise to a "dangerous complacency" among thinkers and leaders of his generation, he said. It caused them to shun "big ideas" and debates, since they assumed these were unnecessary as, after all, history had ended. They could leave it to free markets and democracies to throw up solutions to social and economic problems, if indeed they could be addressed. Some were just inevitable side-effects that had to be accepted, or managed.

The upshot of this was that major global challenges