

Public servants' profligacy

Crores spent in a project without any visible output!

We are used to hearing of reckless use of public money through various methods and means, pillows costing thousands of takas for example, but perhaps for the first time we are hearing of huge sums of money spent on a public project even before completing the very basics to get it going. As reported in this daily yesterday, officials of the Sustainable Forests and Livelihood Project, launched more than a year ago, have spent Tk 57 crore of the Tk 1,500 crore scheme when even some fundamental works such as preparing the training module, selecting instructors and the project areas have not been completed. But they have purchased and rented vehicles and gone on learning visits abroad.

We wonder whether a rented car can cost more than a large flat in a posh area in Dhaka. But that is exactly what is being paid—Tk 2.5 lakh per month for each of the five rented cars. The project officers had very unconvincing responses to the queries of the reporters regarding the lackadaisical progress of the project and the way money has been spent so far. This is not only sheer negligence towards the implementation of the project, it also exposes public servants' scant regard for public money.

This case is fairly demonstrative of the way project money is used in most cases. And this betrays lack of accountability, oversight and, in some cases, acquiescence. No sooner is a project approved than there is a buying spree for vehicles even though most of these officials have vehicles provided by the government. Then there is a beeline for foreign trips for so-called learning experience. And if one goes deep into it, one may well discover that many of those who went abroad had nothing to do with the implementation of the project.

It's about time this wastefulness stopped. The parliamentary oversight committee on Environment, Forest and Climate Change should be complimented for at least venting their spleen at the wasteful way the money has been spent. But we believe it can do more than simply express dismay.

Fishing bans should accompany compensatory measures

Provide alternative livelihoods and allowances for fishermen

We applaud the government for its successful endeavours to increase fish production in the country—efforts that have resulted in Bangladesh ranking third in producing fish from inland water bodies, according to a report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) last year. In the 2016-2017 fiscal year, Bangladesh produced a total of 41,34,000 metric tonnes of fish, including a first-time surplus of 84,000 tonnes. One of the ways this has been possible is by prioritising conservation of jatka (small hilsa) and other species through periodic bans on catching, transporting and selling fish from natural water bodies like the rivers and the sea. This ensures safe breeding and spawning of fish and helps to protect their fries. The bans, however, while significantly increasing fish production, have a detrimental effect on the fisher communities as their survival depends on the amount of fish they can catch and sell each day. During the bans, the fisherfolk are essentially jobless and fall into financial hardship.

At a recent seminar, discussants highlighted the need to help out the fishermen during these lean times when they cannot fish. Long-term planning is needed for this which would ensure alternative livelihoods and also provide adequate allowances to the fishermen and their families, most of whom are poor and lead miserable days during the ban periods. The government should start registering fishermen so that they can be properly monitored and assisted. The state minister for fisheries and livestock gave his assurance at the seminar that the irregularities in distribution of food during the ban periods have been reduced significantly in recent times which we hope is something that will be sustained.

There is no doubt that these periodic bans are needed to ensure a regular supply of fish to be consumed at home and exported abroad. This ultimately benefits the fisher communities. But it is also important to help these communities pull through during the times they are forced to refrain from fishing. The nation has an obligation to support those hardworking fisher folks who provide us with one of the biggest sources of protein.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Norman Borlaug's Green Revolution

A recently published article in *The Daily Star* on Norman Borlaug and his Green Revolution was an inspirational read indeed. I would like to thank the author, Md Roushon Jamil Jewel, for writing such an insightful piece.

It was quite amazing to learn that our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, soon after the liberation of Bangladesh, was able to implement the agricultural revolution in the newly born country.

As mentioned in the article, "Green Revolution in the 1960s was indeed a great milestone for the human civilization", and we need to follow the ideas of Borlaug to ensure food security for our ever-increasing population in the years to come.

As we live in hope and dream, I do agree with the author that we must put our all-out efforts to move towards a sustainable evergreen revolution for the future of our country.

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Apparel sector should not be blinded by technology



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

If you want to understand the present, look to the past. All the talk right now in apparel supply chains is of new technology, automation and robots potentially replacing humans. We read constantly about how customisation is the future—that consumers want to go online and bespoke their clothing to their own specific requirements. "Personalisation" is the name

of the game. Surely it is far better to have personalised products than mass customisation, right? Perhaps so, provided that you *are* prepared to pay for it, but who is? How many people do we see wearing personalised apparel products?

We also hear talk of 3D sampling. Some claim that textile manufacturers which can't provide 3D samples face an uncertain future. Really? I'd be more inclined to believe such rhetoric if I hadn't been hearing people say the same thing for several years. Surely it can be no coincidence that the people making such claims also happen to be those who have the most to gain from such technology gaining traction—including the manufacturers themselves or the consultants trying to sell this technology.

What about the micro-factory? This concept has been in evidence at several textile exhibitions in the past two years, and there is no doubt it is an interesting idea. A glimpse into the future, perhaps, but there are no guarantees at all that such a future will ever arrive. In theory, the micro-factory turns the traditional textile model on its head, switching from the existing paradigm of "produce-deliver-sell" to "sell-produce-deliver". The system is driven by developments in digital technology, online workflow, laser cutting and digital textile printing.

With production and delivery after the sale, this means that production is essentially demand-led: you only sell what you produce, which is surely better for cash flow, right?

If only it were all this simple, however. Where does such a model fit with the cash flow of a factory in Bangladesh producing millions of units per month? Are such factories going to disappear overnight? Who will take up the slack of this lost production?

We need to remember that global apparel supply chains have, fundamentally, changed very little over the past few years. This is a conservative industry and, let's not forget, an industry of tight margins.

Recently, I was at a textile conference in Switzerland. "How many people in the audience are wearing customised clothing?"—a speaker asked the 120-strong audience. Seven people in the room stood up. I am pretty confident that the answer to this question will be similar next year, and the year after. Change will not happen overnight in apparel production, it will be incremental, and many of the fundamentals will remain the same.

Take 3D sampling, for instance. How widespread is this in the apparel industry? I know of very few who use it, and I also recognise why it has not really captured the imagination of buyers. People still like to feel and touch fabrics, which is why trade fairs around the world are actually busier than ever, and the number of textile exhibitions is increasing all the time. Perhaps this is not a good thing as far as the environment is concerned—all those people flying around the world—but it is a fact that textiles and apparel remain a tactile industry, where people like to touch and feel before placing large orders.

And yet, talk of technology, automation, artificial intelligence, the internet of things and other such phrases creates fear among suppliers. They worry they will be left behind, and that automaton will lead to job losses at factories. Workers themselves worry about "sewbots" replacing people. They worry one machine might be able to do the job of five people.

We have to remember that apparel manufacture is not a high-tech industry. This is not car manufacture or silicone chip production, where the economics of automation stack up. This is the production of low-value items which are sold on for tiny margins.

Also consider the fact that automation technology of varying guises has been around for years in the garment industry. Why is it taking so long for the manufacturers to use it? Perhaps it is because labour is so cheap in this industry, certainly in Southeast Asia. Labour costs are not the burden for manufacturers in garment supply chains that they are in other industries.

It's interesting that such worries have been around for hundreds of years in the textile industry. In English-speaking countries, the word "Luddite" is used as an insult, to describe somebody who has failed to keep up with progress. Yet the term has its origins in the textile industry. In the 19th-century England, the Luddites were a radical, secret oath-based organisation of English textile workers who destroyed textile machinery as a form of



PHOTO: AFP

protest!

The group was protesting against the use of machinery and they feared that the time spent learning the skills of their craft would go to waste, as machines would replace their role in the industry.

It's amazing that all these years later, we are having the same discussions now. Were the fears of the Luddites realised? Their fears were greatly exaggerated and often misplaced, as they are now.

We have to remember that apparel supply chains have to run before they can walk. Yes, we need to increase productivity and always be thinking about modernisation. But we also need to get the basics right. Many factories still struggle to even pay basic salaries or have poor factory set-up which leads to huge inefficiencies and a lack of optimisation. They can forget about automation on any kind of serious scale until they sort out such issues.

Consider, also, the cost of automation and other technology solutions such as ERP (Enterprises Resources Planning) which we hear so much about. How much do these systems cost to design and implement (remembering that such technology needs to be tailor-made for individual factories)? The costs here can run into several millions of dollars.

The number of suppliers who can afford to invest this kind of money is limited, especially when the benefits for doing so are not entirely proven or clear.

When I think about the use of technology in apparel supply chains, what I do see is a lot of prototypes or pilots. Many are trialling different types of technology for one-off or short batches. But this has always been the case. Factories will always experiment with new ways of doing things, especially when there is little or no risk involved. Translating these efforts into a commercial basis is entirely different. Many of the technologies being trialled may never actually see the light of day on a commercial basis.

I realise there is a danger of sounding like the Luddites. I mentioned before, but that is not the case. Actually, there is an area where the use of technology and investments in new systems is actually happening. I could use the word "sustainability" here but I prefer the word "efficiency" for I feel these are actually two sides of the same coin. There are small steps which suppliers can take—and are taking—which help them to save money in terms of reducing water use, reducing electricity use, shifting to more modern boilers, and so on. New technologies in

these areas are often relatively inexpensive and the pay-off for suppliers in terms of return on investment can often be in just 12 to 18 months.

Investment in these areas is a low-hanging fruit for textile suppliers. It makes financial sense and the benefits are there to see. It is also worth remembering that there are often grants and other financial inducements available to support these investments, which provide another incentive.

But investments in the garment "factory of the future" that we hear so much about are a different thing entirely.

Too many factory owners still need to get the basics right and take the low-hanging fruit on offer; to make better, more efficient use of their existing capital outlays. They also need to keep in mind that the best technology will only ever be as good as the person who operates it. Good technology is one thing; having the people in place who are trained and educated to operate it effectively, to maximise its potential, is something else entirely.

If we were to have a technology revolution, this would have to go hand in hand with a training and education revolution. This would require wholesale change in garment supply chains such as Bangladesh. The industry is a long, long way from such a scenario.

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Climate change: Is solar radiation management a feasible idea?



QUAMRUL HAIDER

In an op-ed piece published in this newspaper on August 27, 2019, I discussed a number of methods within the context of Solar Radiation Management (SRM) as a way of mitigating some of the impacts of climate change. They are whitening low-level clouds, thinning the Cirrus clouds, injecting sulphate aerosols into the stratosphere, or putting sunshades (mirrors and/or reflectors) in outer space.

These geoengineering options would prevent some of the sunlight from ever reaching the Earth's surface or create more pathways for heat to escape from Earth. The reduced incoming solar radiation would offset some of the warming associated with increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere.

But is SRM a good idea? Is it even feasible?

Despite the many benefits, some of the SRM approaches may have limitations and they could also be a route that could adversely affect the environment. However, it is not yet known what the adverse effects could be, or how damaging they would be. For good measure, some possible side-effects are known. What is also known is that the magnitude of the effects would be proportional to the scale of deployment of the technologies.

Seeding low-level clouds with seawater could produce changes in the amount and pattern of regional rainfall, as well as changes in ocean currents. On the other hand, thinning the high-altitude Cirrus clouds by injecting ice nuclei so that they become more transparent to the heat emitted by the Earth's surface, thereby

producing a cooling effect, could result in changes to precipitation even in regions far away from geoengineered regions, underscoring the risks of remote side-effects, according to several studies.

One of the most widely discussed options for SRM involves emulating the effects of volcanic eruptions by injecting sulphate aerosols into the stratosphere. Spraying the stratosphere with aerosols could have "catastrophic effects in parts of the world already battered by natural disasters," as noted by researchers in an article published in *Nature Communications* in 2016.

They caution that it may disrupt the global hydrological cycle by increasing the frequency of cyclones and droughts in some parts of the world. The aerosols could also deplete the ozone layer that protects us from the harmful ultraviolet radiation. After the Mount Pinatubo eruption, there was a three-percent reduction in the amount of ozone in the atmosphere and rainfall decreased significantly in some parts of the world.

In the case of putting sunshades in orbit around Earth, the potential for unintended consequences such as drought is high. In particular, studies show that a reduction of 1.7 percent insolation could bring about important changes to regional climates, with warming at high latitudes while cooling below necessary level in sub-tropical regions. Furthermore, the prohibitively large cost of transportation of sunshades to outer space is seen as a shortcoming of this programme.

A fundamental problem with all SRM approaches is that they would require continual refreshing. Additionally, once they are put into operation, they have to be continued indefinitely in order to counterbalance the forcing associated with GHG emissions. It should be noted that SRM only offsets warming and does nothing to reduce GHG concentrations.

Hence, once the programmes are stopped following their deployment, temperature changes caused by GHGs would manifest themselves suddenly and could rise beyond the level they otherwise would have.

The critics of SRM are troubled at the thought that our attempt to control the Earth's climate is possibly a matter of hubris rather than a desirable solution. Besides, before shifting the gear to overdrive, they would like to know whether the advantages of SRM outweigh the risks of climate change and how it would alter humanity's delicate relationship to nature.

Moreover, according to the critics, the wisdom of SRM remains highly controversial because of significant scientific and technological uncertainties. One of their strongest fears though is that SRM technologies may divert resources and momentum away from already waning efforts to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide.

More importantly, critics believe that within the social and political context, deployment of SRM technologies has the risk of "reckless pursuit of self-interest by powerful actors" on the world stage. In other words, the spectre of incompetent, negligent, or even malicious uses of the yet-to-be fully developed SRM technologies by rogue leaders alarms the critics.

Proponents of SRM hold that because the Earth's atmospheric system is large and complex, it is impossible to anticipate in advance all the consequences—detrimental and beneficial—of SRM. Nevertheless, the technologies are generally regarded as prudent by them. They, however, agree with the critics that the effectiveness and consequences of the SRM schemes need further studies before they are deployed.

As for governance, the global nature of SRM raises several important issues—scientific, environmental, legal, economic, political and social—that are yet to

be resolved. Clearly, an international framework is imperative for governing SRM. Currently, no widely agreed-upon international governing body or legal or regulatory framework exists to oversee the testing or deployment of SRM technologies. Thus, before deployment, the global community must formulate guidelines and agreements that will govern future development and use of these new technologies.

Alongside the governance issue, there has also been wide acknowledgement of significant ethical concerns. Some of them are: legitimacy of intentionally manipulating the global climate system, what level of risk of unintended consequences is acceptable, lasting effects on future generations, and given the uneven nature of the winners and losers, would the benefits to any one group be allowed to trump the harms to another, etc. Scientists, ethicists, social scientists and political leaders have to work together to address these concerns.

Nonetheless, because of the lack of political will and weak efforts to reduce sufficiently GHG emissions, SRM technologies are an alternative option that could effectively address the environmental risks arising from climate change. If handled properly, they could be a powerful weapon in the fight against climate change, particularly for those countries most vulnerable to its effects. Indeed, one of the authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 2013 report says that if we do not start reducing GHG emissions very soon, we will have to consider these "unattractive options."

Finally, once SRM technologies are fully developed and deployed, we have to shun our carbon-emitting lifestyles. Otherwise, the problem will build up and we will once again be back to square one.

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