

\$21m USAID project to boost agriculture mechanisation

Much more global collaboration needed to tackle shared challenges

Says WEF founder Klaus Schwab

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The USAID has started implementation of a \$21.4 million project with the aim to support the mechanisation of agriculture and enable 243,000 farmers to adopt new mechanisation technology.

The five-year project, which is scheduled to end in September 2024, looks to train manufacturers to develop and adopt new technology of agri-machinery, marketers and machinery service providers (MSPs) and facilitate the MSPs to get access to finance to buy farm machinery.

Some 2,000 light-engineering workers will be trained, said Timothy David Russel, consultant adviser of the Cereal Systems Initiatives for South Asia Mechanisation Extension Activity (CSISA-MEA) project, at a virtual media discussion yesterday.

The USAID is funding the project implemented by International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT) in partnership with International Development Enterprises (iDE) and the Georgia Institute of Technology.

The scheme has been taken at a time when machines plough 98 per cent of the country's farm land.

The USAID said Bangladesh is one of the most mechanised countries in Asia when it comes to land preparation.

"By contrast, the planting and harvesting of the 11 million hectares of rice grown every year in Bangladesh is still largely carried out by hand. At present, all crops grown in Bangladesh are largely planted, weeded and harvested by hand," according to a fact sheet of the project.

It said increasing labour costs and shortages of labour make crops such as rice increasingly expensive and vulnerable to delayed planting and harvesting.

Under the project, the agricultural machinery manufacturers will be supported to improve their capacity to manufacture competitively priced and high quality machines and spare parts.

The CSISA-MEA aims to support machinery marketing companies to expand their sales and machinery-owner support functions into areas currently poorly serviced by agricultural machinery services, including the Rohingya crisis-impacted communities of the Cox's Bazar region.

It expects the interventions will result in \$5 million farm machinery sales and attract \$3 million worth of financing by the financial services sector for all in the agri-machinery value chain, including light engineering companies, marketers and MSPs.

This will result in at 243,000 farmers adopting new technology, said Russel in a presentation at the event.

THE STRAITS TIMES, ANN

World Economic Forum Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab shared his thoughts with Straits Times Editor-in-Chief Warren Fernandez and Asia News Network Editor Shefali Rekhi during an interview on February 9. Below are excerpts from the interview.

Q: Given the recent Davos Agenda week, what made you decide that there was a need to have an in-person meeting in Singapore? What are you hoping this particular meeting would achieve?

Klaus Schwab: The Davos Agenda week at the end of January was very successful. We didn't expect such a great engagement. We had four times as much media reporting about the meeting compared to our 50th anniversary. So it shows that the world really is now preparing for what I call the great reset, which means to think about what policies we need for the after corona era. We have three main tasks at the moment. First, to fight the virus, which is still a top priority in many countries. Second, we have to create recovery of our economies, but we also have to think medium term and long term; what lessons do we take out of the pandemic?

And one conclusion is that the pandemic has accelerated many developments, and at the same time has shown us certain deficiencies, which were in the system even before we entered the virus period.

With Davos week, we had to mobilise the public to create awareness of the need for a great reset. But despite all the advantages of video-conferencing, there is a need to come together in person. Video-conferencing, as we have seen, is very efficient but the emotional dimension is missing, and, at the end, to create trust, to create confidence, you need to address issues not just from a rational point of view, you need also to have the emotional feeling connected to it. So we have seen that the world is longing for coming together again, and what we plan now for the end of August probably will be the first major get-together in person on a global level, bringing together all stakeholders of global society.

But there will be one other difference between the two meetings. The Davos Agenda week was mainly to take stock, to look at long-term visions and so on, but now the forum has established numerous task forces to elaborate on more concrete proposals and those proposals will be discussed in Singapore.

The end of August is very important because the meeting here is taking place before the UN General Assembly week, it's taking place before the G-20, which will meet in October, and it's taking place particularly also before Glasgow COP26 (2021 UN Climate Change

Conference). So we plan to have a major input into all those major global meetings.

But there is another reason for coming here. Because 2021 will be the first year where the GDP of Asia, in terms of purchasing power, will exceed quite substantially the GDP of the rest of the world. So it's also a kind of demonstration of the geopolitical and geo-economic importance this region has acquired over the last decades.

And I also feel that when we look at the power centres in the world, we usually speak rightly so about China and the US, maybe Europe,

leaders from those countries?

A: Of course, we will.

Q: What do you hope will be the outcome of this meeting in August?

A: The forum is not a decision-making body, and what we want to do is to look longer term. International organisations, governments usually have a tendency, under pressure, of course, of elections and so on, to look short term. We do not want to decide about policies, but to provide a longer-term policy framework, which is integrating the different dimensions, of different walks of life, different stakeholders, but we're also interdisciplinary, integrating

So, climate change because this region is probably the most exposed in terms of climate change, rising sea levels and so on.

The second one, you may remember, I have written in 2015 a book on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and I coined this notion. According to the forum's research, half of the working force has to undergo upskilling and reskilling if it wants to be employable at the end of this decade. So, we need a tremendous reskilling and upskilling effort, particularly of low-skilled workers because the occupations, the jobs, will be replaced by robots,



Bangladesh is one of the most mechanised countries in Asia when it comes to land preparation for farming, according to USAID.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

Firms hope for post-pandemic profits from 'digital nomads'

AFP, Paris

Companies around the world are betting that spiking interest in working from abroad during the pandemic will prove the foundation for a profitable new sector that can thrive in the years ahead.

"Covid has sped things up, what used to be a niche has become the norm," says Emmanuel Guisset, whose firm Outsider rents slots in shared living and working spaces to so-called "digital nomads" from Portugal to Hawaii.

He calls the pandemic a "springboard" for his business, one in a whole web of companies offering highly-mobile online workers everything from coworking spaces to Instagrammable villas and training to ease them into their new way of life.

Although it had to close its properties in the first months of the coronavirus outbreak, Outsider enjoyed a 30-percent increase in reservations compared with 2019 and masses of new users.

"When things are back to normal, it's going to explode," Guisset predicts.



STRAITS TIMES

WEF Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab speaks with Straits Times Editor-in-Chief Warren Fernandez and Asia News Network Editor Shefali Rekhi during an interview on February 9.

but actually the Asean region is fundamentally the fastest-growing region in the world. It represents a size which is larger than Europe in terms of population. So it's also, how shall I say, a reference to the new political and economic situation which we have in the world.

Q: On the topic of the reset for the globe, one of the biggest relationships that is in need of a reset would be that between the US and China. Do you see the conference playing a role in helping to bring about that reset, and if so, how?

A: We hope so. The forum traditionally has excellent relations with the United States. The first president who addressed the Davos audience was president Ronald Reagan, and since that time, we had strong cooperation with the government but also with the business community, of course. But we also have really strong cooperation with China. So we have relationships with the two countries. And of course, to respond to your question, I hope for a very strong and high-level participation from those two countries.

Q: So, you'll be inviting the two

different political, technological, social aspects and so on.

Q: What are the key issues you will focus on?

A: There are three big issues which stand out, for me personally. The first one, of course, is climate change because we have this important COP26 meeting, and if it becomes a failure, then I think people will lose hope in our capability to do something about climate change.

Because, until now, of course, we have the Paris Agreement. But the general feeling is that temperatures are rising, we see it with sea temperatures rising, but nothing is really done.

And it needs commitments from a government level but also from a business level. I have written a letter to all our partners, signed together with the chair of the (World Economic Forum's) international business community, Brian Moynihan, who is head of the Bank of America, where we asked our partner companies to commit to be carbon neutral by 2050, but not just to make a commitment, but to come up with an action plan in the next two years.

artificial intelligence and so on. So they have to upskill. And we have this project of upskilling one billion people in 10 years. It's a very concrete project where we work together with companies like Amazon and many of the tech companies to provide the necessary skills training. That's number two.

Number three is food security. And, of course, most important is that we come back, I use again the word "resetting" - that we reset the political context inside which we address all those issues.

The last few years have been very much characterised by confrontation. We need, even if there's fierce competition, as President (Joe) Biden has expressed, a collaborative spirit in those areas where we have a common interest, such as fighting climate change, making sure that we have no food shortage and so on.

I think where we have a common interest, we have to create much more collaboration again. And this collaboration, ideally, integrates all stakeholders. And here, the importance of the annual meeting is evident again.

bKash helps relieve pandemic pain



MOHIUDDIN BABAR

Businesses should be more than the business itself. Milton, a Nobel laureate and noted economist, fully agrees with this sentiment and believes that when a business goes beyond its core activities to undertake credible, welfare-oriented initiatives, it has a tremendously positive impact on society.

For example, some recent initiatives taken by bKash, a leading mobile financial services (MFS) provider, have proven the value of this saying by making time befitting contributions towards the welfare of the common people, consumers or otherwise.

When the coronavirus outbreak first began, the entire world plummeted into a situation the likes of which were never seen before.

The ongoing pandemic has altered our way of living, cultural values and even our way of thinking.

Governments and private organisations from all over the world continue to grapple with the Covid-19 fallout, a horrendous

task indeed and seemingly insurmountable for economies like Bangladesh.

The sheer magnitude of the threat posed by Covid-19 placed massive pressure on the country's limited health care facilities. But then, bKash stepped forward to help the government combat the health crisis.

Arranged by its overseas partner Alibaba, bKash donated 300 ventilators along with 300,000 emergency medical toolkits to the government, which could be recorded as the largest act of social corporate responsibility by any private sector organisation amid the pandemic.

The toolkits included infrared thermometers, masks and other protective gears. Besides, the MFS provider had previously handed over 50 ventilators and around 650,000 units of emergency medical equipment to the prime minister's relief fund in June last year.

Adding to all these time-befitting endeavours, bKash from its own fund provided 30 ventilators to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Dhaka Shishu Hospital, Dhaka CMH and Central Police Hospital as part of its social responsibility to help accelerate the treatment of patients suffering from severe respiratory infections due to Covid-19.

The company also installed an oxygen plant at the BIHS General Hospital as part of this rigorous plan to be on the medical frontline during the unexpected crisis.

The ventilators and other



BKASH

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina virtually takes part in a programme at the Prime Minister's Office in Dhaka on June 4 in 2020 when bKash CEO Kamal Quadir handed over 6.5 lakh medical supplies, including 50 ventilators, donated by China's Alibaba Foundation and Jack Ma Foundation for the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Alibaba's affiliate Ant Group is one of the investors of bKash. Ahmad Kaikaus, principal secretary to the PM, and Major General Sheikh Md Monirul Islam (ret'd), chief external and corporate affairs officer of bKash, were also present.

equipment were the call of the hour for the country's public and private hospitals and other establishments, which struggled to deal with the sudden onrush of Covid-19 patients. It was also certainly a relief for the government, health ministry, hospitals and above all, the frontline doctors, nurses and paramedics who had scant resources.

These donations not only speak volumes of the organisation's unique and responsible business conduct, but also exemplifies its consciousness and thoughtful approach for the

welfare of common people. In fact, bKash had been silently active, or rather proactive, in keeping the wheels of our economy running ever since the outbreak began in March last year.

During the early stages of the pandemic, there was a lot of fear, frustration and uncertainty amid the nationwide economic lockdown and restrictions on public movement. However, bKash rendered a huge subsidy of over Tk 22 crore in the transactions made by its customers during the pandemic. This gave a great

relief to the bKash user community who were already feeling the safety and comfort of monetary transactions. Besides, bKash worked with Bidyanondo Foundation, which gained fame for exemplary charitable works including the One Taka Meal. bKash donated to this organisation to help them establish a hospital in Chattogram.

bKash's commitment to respond to the pandemic does not end there. Through the Sena Kalyan Sangstha, it provided food items to 5,000 poor families while another food

relief programme was also extended to around 100 families of the low-income group in Panchagarh district in May 2020 through a non-government organisation.

Besides, bKash had a significant hallmark in its quest for extending welfare to the common people when it was entrusted to send the prime minister's cash incentive to 15 lakh beneficiaries in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

bKash also delivered stipends to secondary level students in the shortest possible time and they were able to easily cash out from any of the 240,000 nearby agents without cost. This brought added relief to the students and their parents during the Covid-19 period.

Consumer trust made an upward swing when bKash partnered with 9 local commercial banks to facilitate inbound remittances during the early period of the global pandemic. It was almost a dreamlike satisfaction for tens of thousands of Bangladeshi expatriate workers to be able to send money to their families during such a crisis. The beneficiaries were also happy to receive the remittance instantly, which helped boost their morale and confidence amid the economic uncertainty.

While the Covid-19 pandemic steered the need for digital monetary transactions in order to avoid physical contact and ensure social distancing, bKash successfully managed this huge task.

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