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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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The second Covid budget

Proper execution remains the most difficult task

THE finance minister on Thursday presented the 50th annual budget of the country which amounted to Tk 603,681 crore, up from last year's budget of Tk 568,000 crore. Here are our initial reactions to it, and a more detailed analysis will follow.

The health sector is naturally the most focused area during the Covid period and it received some allocation boost last time. But in the current budgetary year, we saw the authorities use only a fraction of the allocated funds. Low implementation of the health ministry's allocated funds at a time of a pandemic stands as a clear testament to our inability to rise to the crisis. How does the government intend to fix this? In his budget speech, the finance minister has mentioned some big plans to tackle Covid, but how realistic are these, really, when implementing the health budget still remains such a difficult task?

That the allocation for the education sector remained the same in terms of size and percentage of GDP is a major disappointment. Covid has literally devastated this sector. The UNESCO had been urging the government to increase the allocation to 6 percent of GDP (from around 2 percent) even before Covid happened. Our educationists have been pushing for a similar increase incrementally. The fact that the government has decided to ignore all recommendations does not bode well for the future of the country to graduate into a middle-income country. The attitude towards education, as reflected in the budget, is a clear signal of how little we have really understood the damage that has been caused by the pandemic in this sector.

The finance minister proposed increasing the allocation for social safety net programmes, which we welcome. However, no details regarding how the beneficiaries of the government's aid programmes will be identified—a major thorn in the side of this sector—have been given. Experts have been urging the government to prepare a national database of people who are in need of government support, since such aid programmes have continued to be marred by corruption even during the pandemic. This recommendation, too, has not been heeded, so how will the government now identify who needs aid and ensure accountability and transparency?

On a positive note, the government has decided to give some tax breaks in certain sectors—including for private healthcare service providers in districts outside of Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur and Chattogram, the agro-industry and other entrepreneurs. We hope this will encourage the private sector.

Unfortunately, although this is the second Covid budget, it does not make clear what lessons were learned from the previous year. There had been criticisms of the ineffectiveness of government aid during the pandemic, particularly in regard to reaching the new poor, helping struggling industries (especially small and medium businesses), etc. It seems this budget has been prepared more or less in the same line as that of last year's. And like last year, even if some of the allocations look good on paper, proper implementation, it seems, will continue to remain the big challenge.

Covid cases on the rise in border districts

They are severely handicapped to combat the virus

WE are alarmed at the recent rise in Covid-19 positive cases in the country, and especially in areas along our borders. Wednesday saw the highest number of positive cases (1,988 cases out of 20,259 samples) countrywide in a month. The daily positivity rate crept up from 9.47 percent on Tuesday to 9.8 percent on Wednesday, and the current average positivity rate is 13.44 percent. However, there is a marked difference in the positivity rates among districts, and those along the border are suffering more, both in terms of higher rates and lack of resources to fight the surge.

Rajshahi, for example, currently has a positivity rate of 16 percent, but saw a horrific 50 percent positive cases on May 31. Rangpur also recently had its highest daily positivity rate of 20 percent since the second wave came about, but the positivity rate in Dinajpur is at 25.86 percent. On May 27, the daily positivity rate in Naogaon came to a worrying 42 percent. Given the expected prevalence of the Indian variant of the virus in bordering areas, restrictions are already being put in place by the district administrations. In Rajshahi and Naogaon, for instance, all night-time activities outside homes have been banned for seven days starting June 2, but mango trade, online trade, and agricultural activities can still go on. Four wards in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya upazila have also been declared red zones, and private and NGO-related activities have been suspended there.

However, we worry that stricter and more committed measures are needed from the government to improve the situation in these border districts, especially given their dire lack of healthcare resources. The Kaliganj Upazila Health Complex operates with only two doctors, which makes assigning shifts while maintaining health guidelines practically impossible. Health complexes in Satkhira have to take their oxygen cylinders to Jashore to have them refilled. Rangpur has a meagre 26 ICU beds between two hospitals, of which 23 were already occupied on Wednesday.

This does not paint a hopeful picture of a country facing the risks of another surge in Covid-19. If the recent situations in India and Nepal—and even the second wave in Bangladesh during March-April—have taught us anything, it is that oxygen and ICU beds are crucial in saving serious Covid patients. The fight against the virus cannot be centralised in and around the capital. We urge the government to take immediate steps to direct resources towards border districts to address these gross deficiencies in the healthcare system there, before the situation gets completely out of hand.

A budget is only as good as its implementation



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

AS another national budget (of Tk 603,681 crore) is passed by the parliament amidst a global pandemic, the biggest concern for the government and all other stakeholders is how well it can be implemented, as there are many new challenges to tackle. The aspirations of the budget—especially the economic growth target of 7 percent—are already being viewed by many as ambitious, and we must keep in mind that the budget will not yield a positive result for the nation unless the government takes immediate measures to ensure its adequate and timely implementation.

According to a recent report by *The Daily Star*, the implementation rate of the national budget has fallen over the last decade, compared to the implementation rate of the fiscal year 2010, when the rate was 89 percent, and FY 2011 when it stood at 97 percent. In FY 2020, it went down to 79.4 percent.

Experts attribute this decline to a number of factors including weak governance, rise of corruption, increasing inefficiency, a lack of accountability as well as a lack of capacity building. And this case of low budget implementation has been amply demonstrated by the performance—or lack thereof—of the Health Services Division.

According to a report released in April this year by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division of the Planning Ministry, in FY 2020-21, the Health Services Division was allocated a fund of Tk 11,979.34 crore, of which it utilised only Tk 2,515.54 crore—around 21 percent of its ADP allocation—in the first nine months. By contrast, other ministries exhausted an average of around 41 percent of the ADP allocations during the same time.

While some suggest that the fall in budget implementation in FY 2020-21 has been low due to constraints placed by the ongoing pandemic, the shoddy performance of the Health Services Division in utilising the ADP fund has been particularly visible and disconcerting, especially as the healthcare

system crumbled under mounting pressure from the second wave of Covid-19 in 2021.

The director general of DGHS, Dr ABM Khurshid Alam, has told the media that this low budget implementation has been the result of a massive engagement of the division in battling the pandemic. But one might be pardoned for asking, why was strengthening the healthcare sector not prioritised amidst a pandemic? If that had been the case, then the concerned division would have made sure to deploy necessary manpower and resources to build the capacity of the healthcare sector. And why, in March and April this year, did we face the acute crisis of ICU beds and oxygen

falling budget execution rate with this writer, noted economist and executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, referred to the problems that are contributing to the deterioration in the budget implementation rate: "In the past, it was generally thought that low-paid bureaucrats didn't get enough incentives to drive this. So we tried to solve this through providing incentives, by increasing their pay and benefits. But this approach apparently didn't work. Secondly, there was also talk of capacity building. One type of capacity building activities is taking training abroad, which can help in acquisition of technical skills.

an appropriate system. Since both transparency and accountability of political governance have become weaker, a section of the bureaucrats have increasingly found it convenient to indulge in corruption and in creating a distance from the people. This is a major problem. Without addressing the weaknesses of the political governance system, we will not be able to find a solution to this problem."

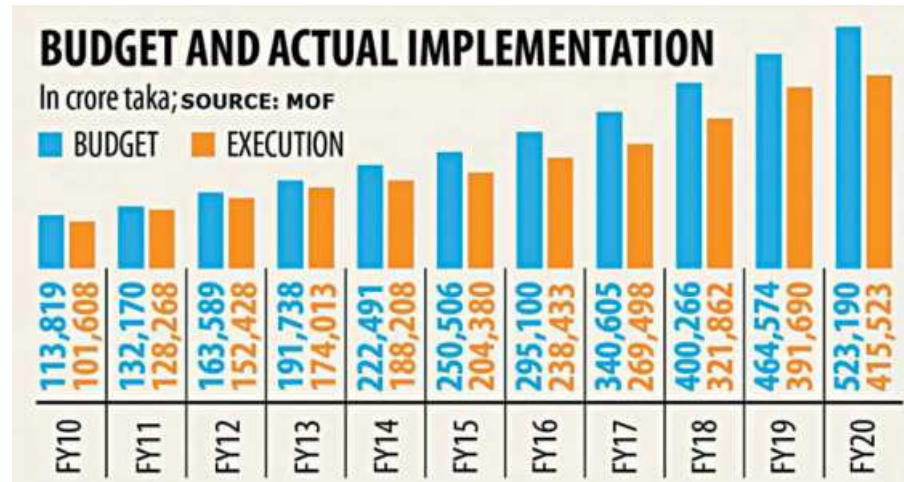
In addition to these, bureaucratic entanglements—in the forms of lengthy processes and approval times—which often work as impeding factors in the timely release of funds should also be streamlined for the effective execution of the budget. And the monitoring mechanism of budget execution needs to be strengthened, too, to improve transparency and ensure accountability of the officials. Otherwise, factors such as corruption would keep on plaguing our budget implementation scenario, aggravating the sufferings of the common people and thwarting the development goals of the government.

It is the system that is problematic, and the system needs to be re-set for it to work properly and to flush out the dirt.

Every year, before and after a budget is proposed and passed, we debate on the size of the budget, how the funds should be allocated to different sectors, what their aspirations should be, etc. We delve deep into the details, dissecting each element, each allocation, to assess and predict the effectiveness of the budget. While these are all important issues, we also should focus on the importance of budget execution. After all, what's the point of having a budget if it remains largely unimplemented? Since budget implementation has registered a declining trend in recent years, we must gear up our efforts to contain this, and we need to do it now.

Whether a budget is well-balanced or too ambitious, it all comes down to how well it is being managed, because a budget is only as good as its implementation. Given that we are still in the middle of a health crisis, which has had enormous impacts on the lives and livelihoods of the people, utilising the budget wisely and efficiently is more crucial than ever before.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @tasneem_tayeb



cylinders in Dhaka and Chattogram, the two major cities? Why is the healthcare system in border districts—where there has been a surge in Covid-19 infections recently—in such a pathetic state, with few or no ICU beds and frighteningly low supply of oxygen cylinders?

At the peak of the second wave, familiar images of people scrambling to find healthcare support to protect their loved ones resurfaced. Every day, there had been reports of how people were succumbing to the virus due to inadequate medical facilities. Had adequate measures been taken on time and the ADP budget allocation utilised properly for the development of the healthcare sector, this repetition of the public's misery could perhaps have been prevented.

While discussing the issue of the

But this doesn't seem to have worked either. There is no dearth of foreign trainings, but their outcome is not being reflected in the performance of the officials."

He added: "So we can say that the approach to incentivise the bureaucrats has not worked. These isolated skills acquisition measures have not worked. The key issue here is the political governance of implementation. It is here that we have to search for answers."

Dr Rahman, who is also the chairperson of the governing body of BRAC, further suggested that lack of professionalism as a result of weak political governance has amplified the problem. "Professionalism has not been developed to the extent expected. Proper political governance nurtures professionalism and creates

The case for a national inventory of intangible cultural heritage



STRIKING A CHORD

ELITA KARIM

WHEN Shadhona was granted accreditation by the UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in December 2019, it was definitely a special moment for Bangladesh. Shadhona, which had started out mainly as a dance institute, was also looking forward to taking up the herculean tasks that lay ahead of them in the coming months. Today, the organisation is mainly known for being a Centre for Advancement of South Asian Culture.

The ICH committee was created with the idea that intangible heritage is an area that requires a high level of expertise due to its complexity. "This level of expertise could only be reached by a committee inspired by similar experiences in the area of international environmental law," says Lubna Marium, noted dancer and artistic director of Shadhona. "Shadhona is the only non-governmental organisation from Bangladesh that has been accredited by the above ICH committee."

Much more than just a dance institute, Shadhona is committed to safeguarding ICH practices in Bangladesh. It is because of their work in preserving local art forms—such as Lathi Khela, Manipuri dance and performative practices of Manasamangal—that they were accredited at the 14th session of the ICH committee at Bogotá, Colombia. However, one of their flagship projects for which Shadhona has been truly praised is designing an online, community-based ICH National Inventory.

In the last two years, Shadhona had taken upon itself the ambitious task of creating a community-led inventory of intangible cultural heritage elements of Bangladesh via an ICH-pedia (much like the Wikipedia) by forming a multi-organisation forum called the Consortium for ICH-pedia, Bangladesh (CIB). CIB includes organisations such as Brotee, Bistara, Bhabanagara, Manipuri Cultural Complex, Gidree Bawlee, etc. The ICH-pedia empowers people and communities to upload information about their own cultural practices, which is published after verification by an expert committee. "We have trained over a thousand students, community members, academics, and officers of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to upload information in the ICH-pedia,"

says Lubna Marium. "We have worked with ethnic communities like the Santhal, Mro, Hajong, Garo, Tripura, Chakma, Mahali, Patra, Barman, Karmakar, Khasia, Bishnupriya, Meitei, Orao and many others. It is important that the ICH-pedia is made entirely by the various communities, and with their written consent."

The inventory section on their website (shadhona.org) has a plethora of

The inventory created by CIB under Shadhona's leadership is indeed a one-of-a-kind platform where culture enthusiasts, academics, historians and students alike would be able to learn about Bangladesh.

information on specific divisions, cities and cultural practices in Bangladesh. For instance, a click on "Chittagong" will let the visitor explore the oral and traditional expressions of the city through a popular book called *Chattogramer Probad Probahan*; learn about *dudhak*, a musical instrument played in the Hill Tracts; sampan boat building under traditional craftsmanship; Shefali Ghosh, the famous Chittagonian singer, and much more. Information and features on all the cities of Bangladesh are still being uploaded by the communities, which are of course being verified for accuracy.

This inventory has come too late, according to Lubna Marium. Bangladesh should have created this inventory more than a decade ago. "Bangladesh had actually signed the ICH Convention in 2009. The first stipulation of signing the ICH Convention is that the state must prepare an inventory of all ICH practices within its territory within two years of signing the convention. It is now 12 years and Bangladesh has not still prepared an inventory. This, in spite of a USD 200,000 fund for this purpose by the Azerbaijan government!"

According to Marium, in December

2017, Shadhona was commissioned by the UNESCO to prepare an assessment report about the status of the government's efforts to prepare a national inventory of ICH practices. "We did not just undertake an intensive pilot inventorying study of ICH in Bangladesh, in the selected area of Sylhet, of the Bangladeshi Manipuri community, we also prepared the initial framework for an ICH-pedia," she adds.

The second obligation of the state party to the 2003 Convention is submission of periodic reports on the legislative, regulatory and other measures taken for the implementation of this convention, especially the integration of ICH practices with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Marium adds: "We are ready to do this pro bono only if we can get proper recognition from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which is turning out to be a long-drawn-out process."

Despite several talks with the ministry, the ICH-pedia has still not been recognised. "Shadhona has been in correspondence with the ministry since mid-2018," says Marium. "Innumerable emails have been exchanged, and frequent meetings with the minister and various officials were held. Since September 2020, the CIB led by Shadhona has been in discussion with the ministry about the signing of an MOU, which till date has not come about. We have not received any valid reason for the delay. Every week, we receive notifications that the MOU will be signed in a couple of days." Shadhona has also been trying to convince the ministry to not just recognise CIB's ICH-pedia but also allow them to help the ministry to revise the National Cultural Policy of Bangladesh. "Various agencies of the ministry are supposed to move forward with the talks and finalise everything. I am not sure why this is taking so long."

Clearly, the authorities have failed in preparing an inventory and overhauling Bangladesh's National Cultural Policy to incorporate the requirements of the ICH Convention, adds Marium. "In fact, our Cultural Policy was last updated in 2006 and it's not consonant with the contemporary concepts of cultural management," she says. "For years, UNESCO has been requesting Bangladesh to fulfil its obligations. This year, 16 countries had applied for inscription of their ICH practices within UNESCO's global listing. Only Bangladesh's application was rejected, on the grounds that it had failed to fulfil the obligations of the ICH Convention. This was extremely embarrassing for all of us."

However, according to Jesmin Nahar,

Senior Assistant Secretary at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the ministry has taken an initiative to continue work while maintaining procedures. "The ministry has undertaken a number of tasks as a signatory to the 2003 Convention. Creating an inventory is one of the major tasks in this regard," she says. "A memorandum of understanding is in the process of being signed with the Shadhona Consortium for inventory, which is currently at the Ministry of Law for vetting."

Nahar also adds that an inventory is also being made from Bangladesh National Museum, Bangla Academy, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, and Sonargaon Arts and Crafts Foundation. "We are almost done with the inventory on topics such as Rasa Punrima, Jatra Pala, Shakrain, Baul Sangeet, Shokher Haari, Patachitra, Shital Pati, Rickshaw Painting, Nakshi Kantha, and Patali Molasses. It will soon be available on our website with the approval of the National Committee. In the meantime, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy intends to preserve many lost intangible cultural customs of our region, and has already initiated a policy on the art form of Jatra Pala."

Regarding the delay in signing an MoU with Shadhona, Jesmin Nahar says that certain courses of action need to be considered before moving towards making an MoU with any organisation: "Maintaining the procedure and bringing in the opinions of departments, among other activities, are currently underway, but these have been delayed due to procedural reasons and the coronavirus pandemic," she adds. "It will be unwise to delay the matter any further. However, discussions and statements are not admissible when trying to formalise an initiative, especially if it is a government-based one, as it requires us to maintain strict official procedures."

"Now that the process has already reached the Ministry of Law for vetting, we have to wait until the formalities are completed. Meanwhile, steps are being taken to update the National Culture Policy 2006, and a separate provision for ICH has also been promised."

The inventory created by CIB under Shadhona's leadership is indeed a one-of-a-kind platform where culture enthusiasts, academics, historians and students alike would be able to learn about Bangladesh, no matter where they are in the world. A step towards going global, the ICH-pedia has definitely put Bangladesh on the world map, for all the good reasons.

Elita Karim is Editor, Arts & Entertainment and Star Youth, *The Daily Star*. Twitter: @elitakarim