

A more pro-people budget expected

The authorities must ensure efficient implementation and a system of accountability

SINCE the pandemic hit Bangladesh in early 2020, the poverty rate has doubled—for every five people in Bangladesh, two are now living below the poverty line. There has been a 49 percent decline in salaried income, with daily wage labourers being hit particularly hard, and households have had to cut back on crucial spending on health, education and other necessities. In the run-up to the recent announcement of the proposed budget for the fiscal year 2021-22, there was hope that the latest budget would aggressively tackle these pandemic-induced inequalities and ensure that the affected are able to get back on their feet.

Although the two new safety net funds—Tk 7,300 crore for the pandemic-affected and Tk 5,000 crore for climate victims—are welcome news, an article in this daily yesterday detailed how the major issue will be with implementation, since the government still has no up-to-date dataset on vulnerable populations. And so far, the government stimulus packages to help the Covid-affected have mainly served the formal sector. If the government has any new plans to support the estimated 1.35 crore informal-sector workers who lost their jobs during last year's shutdown, we are yet to hear of them.

The budget also made very little provisions for the unemployed—a disappointment for the middle-class people who are struggling with a loss of work and yet are ineligible for social safety net programmes. In a similar vein, returnee migrant workers were left out of most considerations, with the focus being on increasing remittances instead. While we understand the government's emphasis on boosting the economic recovery, as reflected in a range of tax cuts and exemptions as well as efforts to increase investments, we are worried that the current policies do not sufficiently target the people who are unlikely to directly benefit from such economic policies.

In terms of pro-people policies, we are astonished to see that the allocation for education remained almost unchanged in terms of proportion of GDP, despite the very real fears of irreparable learning losses, made worse by the digital divide, which could hamper the future of students and have widespread ramifications on our economy and society. The public spending on healthcare also saw a minimal increase, despite expectations of a renewed focus on access to primary healthcare.

If anything, this shows the higher authorities' lack of faith in the proper execution of such budgetary allocations. However, this inability to act promptly during crisis periods and the overall lack of effectiveness are unacceptable in such fundamental public sectors of a soon-to-be middle-income nation. We hope the government will now focus all their energy on not just the efficient implementation of the budget, but also on building a system of transparency and accountability that ensures that public funds are no longer misused.

Trafficking of girls and women on the rise

Authorities must protect them and ensure strict legal action against the traffickers

A report in *The Daily Star* on June 3 highlighted the harrowing experiences of three trafficked victims who were lured to India under false promises of getting well-paying decent jobs. In reality, they were lured by members of a sex trafficking ring, sexually abused and forced into prostitution. Thousands of women and girls have already been trafficked from Bangladesh to India and other countries, and the trend seems to be increasing with the traffickers finding new ways to prey on vulnerable girls and women.

One of the victims, a 16-year-old girl, has filed a case against 12 suspected sex traffickers under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012. She was able to do so only after fleeing with two other women from Bangalore, India, where they had been forced into sex work for 77 days. It's a relief that three of the 12 suspects have already been apprehended. The Deputy Commissioner of Tejgaon zone of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) said that another five suspects are inside Bangladesh right now. We hope that they will be arrested and brought to justice soon.

Among the three alleged culprits currently behind bars, two have already confessed. According to these statements, one of them trafficked 1,000 women to India in eight years, while another helped to traffic at least 500 women to India by crossing the border. Incidentally, the first arrests of this kind were made by the Indian police. A video clip of torture and sexual assault that had gone viral prompted the Indian police to arrest six Bangladeshis involved with this crime. On the other hand, Bangladeshi law enforcers have found information about an international human trafficking racket which consists of some Bangladeshi personnel. The good news is that Bangladesh Police has arrested four members of this racket, one of whom is the leader of this group, and placed them on a five-day remand.

We urge the government to strictly implement the human trafficking prevention act and also the courts to mete out exemplary punishment to the traffickers. The government deserves kudos for establishing seven special tribunals to ensure the trial of human trafficking cases proceeds in a speedy manner. All the investigative branches of the police now have to remain alert so that no more trafficking takes place, while the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has to remain vigilant on a continuous basis to prevent this crime. There is, moreover, a crying need for more support for those who are rescued from the grips of these traffickers so that they can return to their families and communities and be treated with compassion and dignity. Rehabilitation programmes for the trafficking victims have to be prioritised.

Students getting a slim slice of the budget pie



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A preparatory meeting for ULAB's planned virtual convocation, I suggested that we use the iconic image of Keanu Reeves dodging many bullets in the *Matrix* trilogy as our promotional campaign. After all, our motto this year is "against all odds", which chimes with Reeves' ("Neo" in the movie) slo-mo tackling of a flurry of bullets. The pandemic has made us take shelter in a virtual world as we try to protect ourselves from the multifrontal attack of the ever-evolving virus. Everyone laughed, and my suggestion was nothing more than "a glitch in the system" just like déjà vu is a glitch in the "matrix"—the simulated reality that makes humanity unaware that artificial intelligence has actually taken over the world. Not everyone shares their likings of the same movies; unfortunately, thanks to a global crisis, we all share the same predicaments.

Going through the reports on the budgetary allocation for education, I had a déjà vu. There is not much difference from last year's facts and figures, both in terms of size and percentage. The finance minister in his budget speech proposed an allocation of Tk 36,486 crore for secondary and higher education under the national budget of Tk 603,681 crore. In FY 2020-2021, the allocation in these sectors was Tk 33,118 crore. For technical and madrasa education, the allocation shows a slight rise from last year's figure of Tk 8,345 crore to Tk 9,153 crore, while the figure for primary and mass education stands at Tk 26,314 crore against last year's Tk 24,937 crore. The total amount of Tk 71,951 crore—for the Primary and Mass Education Ministry, Secondary and Higher Education Division, and Technical and Madrasa Education Division combined—makes up 11.91 percent of the total outlay of the FY 2021-22 budget, and its share in the GDP stands at 2.08 percent.

Is the feeling that we have seen the same education budget last year a glitch in the system? There was hope that the budget for 2021-22 would bring some succour to the sector that is reeling with the Covid-19 pandemic adversely affecting it. Before the pandemic hit us, we met the criteria to move out of the list of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) by 2024. The

revised schedule is 2026. The graduation requires considerable improvement in our human indexes. Yet a Wikilist showing government education expenditures of various countries in percentage of GDP places Bangladesh on the 183rd spot. Only ten other countries have less than our 2 percent allocation, and the percentage is significantly lower than the world's average of 4.5 (World Bank, 2019). The World Bank data claims that Bangladesh actually spent 1.3 percent of its GDP in 2019, whereas the two other neighbouring countries that have qualified for LDC graduation—Bhutan and Nepal—spent 6.9 percent and 5.1 percent respectively. The UNESCO advises a minimum 6 percent of the GDP for education for a country's sustainability.

What are the implications of a smaller slice of the budget pie for education? For one, it does not demonstrate any sincere desire or designated roadmap for a recovery from the pandemic-inflicted losses. The finance minister did mention the public TV and community radio initiatives. The efficacy of those projects is anybody's guess. Suffice to remind one of a viral BTV programme in which the teacher could not solve a simple addition. To add insult to injury, the internet data price and

whether to bring our students back to physical classrooms or continue teaching remotely for the rest of the year. Meanwhile, many countries around the world have adopted a hybrid model that combines on-campus classes with virtual classes. We are still on a thinking-what-to-think mode. The UGC has recently woken up from its proverbial slumber to ask us to discuss the issue at an academic council level and go for physical exams.



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

The myopic decision to increase tax on the private universities will brew tension in an already unstable system.

As an educator-cum-administrator, I know how many of our students have been traumatised by these virtual classes and social distancing, and how many of our faculty members are suffering from Zoom fatigue. The number of students dealing with mental stress, anxieties, and even suicidal thoughts is staggering. Experts agree that in the absence of proper incentives, many students will be forced to leave education and add to the tally of young offenders, child marriage, early pregnancy and child labour.

The only sector that has shown some resilience during this pandemic has been slapped with a 15 percent tax. Sheikh Kabir Hossain, president of the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB), urged the government earlier saying: "During the Covid-19 situation, even as the private universities are facing a fund crisis, the imposition of a 15 percent income tax on them by the government will exacerbate the crisis even more."

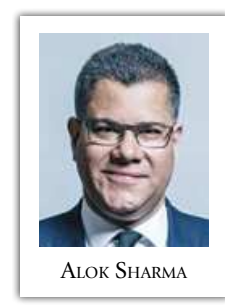
To think that only the upper-middle class and the affluent class attend the private universities is a fallacy that we cannot afford. Dear Minister, please come and sit with us at a financial support or scholarship giving meeting. Listen to the

the price of mobile devices will also go up after this budget.

The proposal of using public education platforms or paraphernalia does not add up. At the sight of coronavirus, in March last year, we scrambled to our smartphones and computers to download Zoom, Google suite, or MS Teams. Under strict lockdown measures, we asked our students to decamp from closed campuses, and they spent the next indefinite period of time (14 months and counting) logging on to classes from their homes, using their own electronic devices and data.

With the vaccine drama still unfolding, we are still grappling with the idea of

We must work together to deliver on climate goals



ALOK SHARMA

THIS World Environment Day, I am reflecting on my recent visit to one of the most ecologically important countries in the world. Sadly, Bangladesh is also one of the most

vulnerable to the destructive effects of climate change. More than 163 million people living here are only too well aware of this. My visit to Bangladesh has come at a crucial time, with five months to go before the UK welcomes the countries of the world to Glasgow for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference, COP26. This is our moment to get the world on track to address the enormous threat of climate change and build a cleaner, brighter future for us all.

We know what we need to do, because we've already agreed what we're aiming for. In 2015, the world signed the Paris Agreement, an international deal to tackle the climate crisis. That agreement commits us to limit global temperature rises to well below two degrees, aiming for 1.5 degrees, because the science tells us that would avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Every fraction of a degree makes a difference. An average global temperature rise of two degrees, compared to 1.5, would see hundreds of millions more people affected, and twice as many plant and three times as many insect species losing vast swathes of their habitat.

However, since the 1.5 degree target was set, the world has not done nearly enough and our planet is heating up. In my role as COP26 President Designate, I have witnessed the impact first hand: melting glaciers, crop degradation, villagers forced from their homes. Here in Bangladesh, I have heard how the catastrophic Cyclone Amphan in May 2020 was transformed into a "super cyclone" due to sea surface temperatures in the Bay of Bengal being 2C hotter than usual at that time of year; also, how sea level rise in the low-lying delta, drought in the north, and changing rainfall patterns across the country are forcing people into over-crowded urban areas; and how the natural defences of the Sundarbans mangrove forest can protect villages from high wind speeds and

storm surges—natural defences which are sadly being shrunk by the effects of industrialisation and our changing climate.

If we continue as we are, these effects will get worse, and fast.

The Climate Action Tracker estimates that if countries keep to their emissions reduction targets, we are now on course for average temperature rises of 2.4 degrees. This is progress on their estimates this time last year. But there is much further to go. To limit warming to 1.5 degrees, we must halve global emissions by 2030. So this is the decisive decade.

We must act now to launch a consistent and concerted effort to reduce emissions throughout the next ten years, and to use the Covid-19 recovery to reimagine our

we can work together to raise global ambition around these goals.

First, we must put the world on a path to driving down emissions until they reach net zero by the middle of this century. This is imperative to keep 1.5 degrees within reach. So we need countries to come forward with clear targets to reduce emissions. This means near-term 2030 emissions reduction targets consistent with net zero by the middle of the century. And these targets must be based on the science, so that net zero is not just a vague aspiration, but a concrete plan.

We also need to see action on the most polluting sectors. If we are serious about 1.5 degrees, Glasgow must be the COP that consigns coal power to



'Glasgow must be the COP that consigns coal power to history.'

COLLAGE: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

economies, building a better future—one with green jobs and cleaner air, and increasing prosperity—without harming the planet.

This is what makes the next United Nations climate conference in Glasgow, COP26, so critical. It must be the moment where every country, and every part of society, embraces their responsibility to protect our precious planet and keep the 1.5 degree target alive. And we have a clear plan to get there.

As COP26 President Designate, alongside the Prime Minister, fellow ministers and the whole of the UK's diplomatic network, I am pressing for action around four key goals. And I am pleased to have had a positive discussion with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and other ministers this week about how

history, calls time on deforestation and signals the end of polluting vehicles. So we are working with governments and through international organisations to end international coal financing, a personal priority of mine. We are urging countries to abandon coal power, and we are working with developing countries to support their transition to clean energy.

We are seeing real progress. The G7 Climate and Environment Ministers' meeting, which I recently co-chaired, committed G7 nations to end all new direct government support for international coal power by the end of 2021. And ministers agreed to transition away from dirty coal domestically to an overwhelmingly decarbonised power system in the 2030s. I am encouraged that Bangladesh is also rethinking its energy

prayers of the students who are failing to pay the tuition fees as their parents have lost their jobs or business, or they themselves have lost their tuition. Dear Minister, please visit the FB pages run by the teachers who are half-fed or running away from creditors as their employers have either halved or stopped their salaries. Track the number of faculty and staff members who have lost their jobs during this pandemic. They do not have influential brokers to make their cases heard. There is no incentive package for them.

Not all private universities are profit-making machines or certificates-selling entities. Weed out the bad ones if needed, but do not throw the baby with the bathwater. There are universities that are trying to make a difference. Private universities are contributing to the national human capital. Students (public or private) are not commodities. Any additional tax will force the private institutions to increase their tuition fees. In the process, there will be more dropouts and student mobility. Those who can afford will look for opportunities abroad. These graduates will not be able to contribute to national growth because of a policy that fails to see the big picture. Meanwhile, "foreign" experts will keep on skimming billions from our job sector.

The myopic decision to increase tax on the private universities will brew tension in an already unstable system. One just needs to recall the No-VAT Movement in 2015 when students took to the streets chanting that they were not value-added commodities.

With the new taxation, the non-profit organisations will be compelled to retract their development activities. Without investing in cutting-edge technology, research, and scholarly publications, the institutions will not be able to provide the local students with the best practices. According to an ADB report, "universities that adopt quality online learning, forge significant partnerships, and demonstrate results in preparing students of all ages for work in a technology-driven economy, stand the best chance of thriving after the pandemic."

Have we made enough provisions to thrive in a post-pandemic world? This will require more than the computer animation applied to Neo to avoid the bullets that are heading our way.

Shamsad Mortuza is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English (on leave) at Dhaka University.

trajectory, and reducing its pipeline of coal-fired power stations. I have confirmed that UK support is available for scaling up renewable energy.

Our second goal is to protect people and nature from the worst effects of climate change. The climate crisis is already with us and we must act on the very real need for flood defences, disaster management systems and other vital efforts to minimise, avert and address the loss and damage caused by climate change. As chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, Bangladesh is showing real leadership in this area, from early warning and evacuation systems saving lives to climate-resilient crops ensuring food sources are protected.

Our third goal is finance, without which the task ahead is near impossible. Developed countries must deliver the USD 100bn a year they promised to support developing countries. The UK is leading by example, having committed 11.6bn pounds between 2021 and 2025. And we need all developed countries to step up. It is a matter of trust.

We must also make finance easier to access and increase the sums available to protect people and nature. In March, I brought together ministers from 50 governments and international institutions to address these issues, and we are focused on delivering the commitments made at that meeting. I am pleased that Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr A.K. Abdul Momen joined that meeting and has confirmed Bangladesh's willingness to work with us on this.

Fourth, we must work together to deliver on these goals. That includes building consensus among governments, so the negotiations in Glasgow are a success, as well as bringing businesses and civil society on board behind our COP26 goals and building up international collaboration in critical sectors. I heard from some of the many climate experts here in Bangladesh, from young leaders to private sector companies. Their message was clear: they want to create a cleaner, greener, and more secure future.

I call on all countries to step up efforts on these goals, because COP26 is our last hope of keeping 1.5 degrees alive, our best chance of building a brighter future. This is our moment—there are no second chances. Let's seize it together.

Alok Sharma is a British politician currently serving as President Designate for COP26, the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference. He visited Bangladesh from 2-3 June 2021.