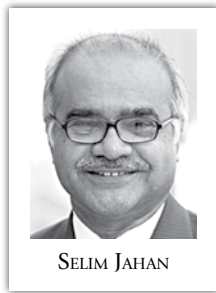


From gender inequality to climate change

Human development challenges of Bangladesh require urgent attention



SELIM JAHAN

AS Bangladesh looks forward to its next 50 years, there remain significant human development challenges for the country.

Some of these challenges are lingering challenges, like poverty and gender inequality; some are deepening challenges, like inequalities and climate change; but some are, undoubtedly, emerging challenges, like human security and the Covid-19 pandemic. The global scenario also impacts human development challenges for Bangladesh, which require different strategies and institutions.

As of 2019, around 34 million people were still in income poverty in Bangladesh. More than one in every four children are stunted and more than one in every five children are underweight. In Bangladesh, in 2018, there was one doctor for every 2,000 people, one nurse for every 2,500 people, and one hospital bed for every 1,250 people. About 45 percent of people were without safely managed drinking water services in 2019 and 22 percent were without electricity. More than half of those who have jobs are in vulnerable employment.

Over the years, Bangladesh has been able to quantitatively expand its

public health services are severely deprived of resources and facilities and, as a result, poor and marginalised people do not get quality services. This means that expansions of services have been achieved with qualitative compromises.

Bangladesh has a working age young population of nearly 30 million, but only 30 percent of the total employed people in Bangladesh are young people. Given the current situation and the

three women do not have access to financial institutions with mobile banking services. Therefore, women's empowerment remains a lingering human development challenge for Bangladesh.

Inequality has become the defining issue of Bangladeshi society and as such, has become a deepening challenge. In Bangladesh, the Gini index of income, a measure of income

change. Indeed, climate change affects physical and social environments, knowledge, assets, etc. For example, in salinity- and drought-prone areas, there are significant deprivations of drinking water, which may lead to serious health issues for the population. Access to resources, capabilities and opportunities intensify the risks. In the ultimate analysis, climate change is not only an environmental challenge,

the past years. Notwithstanding the almost 34 million people already living in poverty in Bangladesh, Covid-19 (through its economic repercussions) may push another 30 million people into poverty. The country may also lose a total of 1.1 million to 1.6 million jobs for the youth, depending on the containment of the virus. As of June 2020, a total of 70,000 workers lost their jobs in the garments industry of Bangladesh. Covid-19 has already exposed the fragility of the health system, which may become more vulnerable in the coming days. Information technology-based education may generate more inequalities as children from rural areas or from poor households will not have access to this technology. Covid-19 will also have asymmetrical impacts on women in terms of their formal work in the economy as well as on the burden of their household and care work. It may lead to more friction and domestic violence because of lockdowns. All this is bound to have serious implications on the mental health of people.

In recent times, issues of democratic space, people's participation, intolerance and violence in society have been identified as emerging threats to human development in Bangladesh. All these have serious impacts on people's security. The affluence, wealth and power biases of the system have made the situation worse. In many instances, terror has become our culture and violence our language.

The global economic system has become more fragile and inward-looking because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the economic growth of the rest of the world (including of developed countries) slows down, Bangladesh may be adversely affected in three ways. First, the demands for its garments, and its unskilled workers in the Middle East, may decline. Secondly, there may be impositions of non-tariff trade restrictions by the developed world and finally, there will be fewer opportunities for concessional aids or grants. All these will reduce the resources available for human development in Bangladesh. Addressing the human development challenges of Bangladesh—whether lingering, deepening or emerging—will require both policy actions and institutional reforms.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

In recent times, issues of democratic space, people's participation, intolerance and violence in society have been identified as emerging threats to human development in Bangladesh.

basic social services. Yet, the quality of such services has remained a lingering concern. This is especially true of health and educational services. For example, in the health sector, there are three-tier service systems—public services (geared towards common people), private services (meant for the middle and upper-middle classes), and services beyond the borders (availed by the richest class). Even though there have been expansions in terms of quantity,

projected demographic dividend till 2030, ensuring jobs for people, particularly for young people, remains a lingering challenge. Furthermore, as the content and the organisation of jobs are rapidly changing, getting our young people ready for a globalised digital 21st century economy is a huge task.

Over the years, even though remarkable progress has been made in the area of women's empowerment, women still face several deprivations—often just because of their sex. About 60 percent of women in the age group of 20-24 years get married at age 18. About 58 percent of women face domestic violence by their intimate partners. Furthermore, for every 100 unemployed male youth, there are 150 unemployed female youth. Of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) graduates, only eight percent are women. One in every

inequality, has increased from 0.39 in the early 1990s to 0.48 in 2016, suggesting an increasingly uneven income distribution over time. But the inequalities have also expanded in non-income areas, such as health, education, ownership of natural resources, etc. Furthermore, there are inequalities not only in terms of outcomes, but also in terms of opportunities—in health and education, as well as in productive resources, such as credit.

Another deepening challenge for Bangladesh is climate change. Climate change-induced extreme weather events are estimated to have caused an estimated yearly loss of GDP of USD 1.7 billion. Loss of arable lands and livelihoods, displacement of people, loss of agricultural production and food insecurity are caused by an increased frequency and intensity of various natural disasters, induced by climate

but it has become a deepening human development challenge for Bangladesh.

Over the years, the governance and the institutional structure of Bangladesh have been suffering on three fronts—inefficiency and ineffectiveness, corruption and leakages, and lack of transparency and accountability. The quality of governance depends on issues like rule of law, the oversight function, judicial independence, meritocracy-based appointments and promotions of public officials, transparency and accountability. Concerns have been raised in these areas as human development challenges deepen for Bangladesh.

Just like any other country, the Covid-19 pandemic is posing as an unprecedented emerging human development crisis for Bangladesh. It may erode the human development gains that the country has made over

Finding a balance between official secrecy and citizens' right to information

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

"WE see all governments as obscure and invisible," said Sir Francis Bacon, English philosopher and statesman, in 1605. Governments should work behind the scenes, beyond public view, he felt. And this is how the British Government worked till the dawn of the 21st century, when Britain's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was adopted in 2000.

The UK was late to the party, with other western nations having forged ahead with the adoption of FOIAs (Sweden as early as 1766). The US came two centuries later in 1966 and scores of other countries adopted theirs since then, until it became embarrassing for the UK not to follow suit. Political parties extolled the virtues of freedom of information while in opposition, but did little to advance it when in power. Government and the bureaucracy found it hard to abandon their long-held practice of exercising power over the people under a cloak of secrecy. The British public, too, appeared unprepared for change. Journalists seemed to be the only ones clamouring for change.

By the time Tony Blair came to power in 1997, the concept of public interest as the pathway to good governance was firmly set as international standard. Blair found it opportune to embrace the pro-people concept to enhance his popularity. Open government, he argued, would be the solution for many things that were wrong in the British system which was "about 50, 60, 70 years behind the actual feelings and sentiments of the broad majority of people." The Freedom of Information Act would deliver "not just more open but more effective and efficient government."

Why did it take so long for a leading world power to adopt the law? The answer lies in the inherent tension that exists between the intrinsic tendency of governments to hide their activities from the people and the increasing demand of the people to know how their governments work. It manifests all over the world, in countries large or small, old or new, north or south. For Tony Blair, it surfaced soon after the Act came into force. It troubled him so much that in his memoir, *The Journey*, published in 2010, he famously lamented:

"Freedom of Information Act. Three harmless words. I look at those words as I write them and feel like shaking my head 'til it drops off. You idiot. You naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it."

Blair concluded that the adoption of FOIA was one of his greatest mistakes in office. He found it to be a "dangerous act" as it affected government's ability to debate and decide issues in confidence. As opposition leader, he believed that FOIA would "signal a new

relationship between government and people: a relationship which sees the public as legitimate stakeholders in the running of the country". This belief was shaken as prime minister when he felt its impact. The law, to him now, was "utterly undermining of sensible government".

Blair justified his sweeping change of mind by the fact that the FOIA was not being used by "the people" but by journalists who used it as a "weapon" against the government. While the Act is now used by people from all walks of life, for a much-harried Tony Blair, hounded by journalists for his role in the disastrous Iraq invasion and other internal issues, the use of the Act to dig up sensitive records on his administration was too much to bear.

Tony Blair's exasperations are relevant for us for two reasons. One, Bangladesh shares a

Concerned citizens, particularly those knowledgeable about the inner workings of the government, could play an important role by contesting the official position on the status of specific government records based on law. By doing so, they can help to rein in the innate tendency of public offices to deny information in the name of official secrecy.

similar governance culture with the UK; and two, Blair's gripes about FOIA exemplified the inherent conflict between official secrecy and citizens' right to information. The latter came into sharp focus last month through an unfortunate incident involving a senior investigative journalist, Rozina Islam, at a government secretariat in Dhaka.

While indisputably regrettable, the incident has brought Bangladesh's own Right to Information Act (RTIA) sharply into public attention. More articles and comments appeared in the press and more discussions took place in the electronic media on the importance of the Act and its primacy over the Official Secrets Act 1923 than ever before.

If those who were enraged by the Rozina incident turn their efforts towards wielding

the RTI law as it was intended, they will do a lasting service to the country.

The progress achieved by RTIA in the country so far has been possible largely due to efforts of many dedicated NGOs and individual activists who have succeeded in promoting the law mainly at the grassroots level and among the semi-urban middle-class population. The results are limited to the basic and mid-level objectives of the RTI pyramid, such as personal needs and lower-level transparency goals.

To reach the top of the pyramid, however, the law must be used for higher-level public interest accountability goals foreseen in the law.

Concerned citizens, particularly those knowledgeable about the inner workings of the government, could play an important role by contesting the official position on the status of specific government records based on law. By doing so, they can help to rein in the innate tendency of public offices to deny information in the name of official secrecy. It is such interactions that help to test the scope of the law and contribute to its maturity.

A good way of doing so in the context of last months' agitations, which included a public demand to scrap the Official Secrecy Act (OSA) 1923, would be to test its validity vis-a-vis RTIA on a given issue. If such an RTI request is denied by an authority under one or more exemption clauses of Section 7 of RTIA, it could be the basis for an internal appeal procedure under the Act. If the appeal fails to obtain disclosure, a complaint could be lodged with the Information Commission (IC). If the latter, too, upholds nondisclosure, its decision could be challenged at the High Court (HC) under its writ jurisdiction. There are instances where the HC has ordered disclosure. Unfortunately, many questionable decisions remain pending before the Court while many others are untested for lack of pursuit.

The RTI process may indeed be lengthy and cumbersome, as many allege, but it is a constructive way to build a law-based society. There are, of course, good reasons for the civil society to seek the scrapping of the OSA, adopted during colonial times, but before that is achieved, RTIA provides a good basis to prevent its abuse.

The Rozina incident is a stark reminder of the inherent tension that exists between official proclivity to do things in an "obscure and invisible" manner and the democratic value of "open and accountable" governance. RTIA provides a unique opportunity for concerned citizens to help establish a balance between the two, by taking the lead to set up a good practice of using the law and paving the way for others to follow.

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Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Local Government Engineering Department
Office of the Upazila Engineer
Indurkani, Perojpur
www.lged.gov.bd

Memo No. 46.02.7990.888.14.005.20-292

Date: 14/06/2021

e-Tender Notice: 08/2020-21

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following works, details are given below:

Sl No.	Tender ID	Package No.	Description of works	Tender security submission deadline	Tender closing & opening time
1	588071 (LTM)	e-Tender/ NBIDNNGPS/ PER/IND/2020-2021/W1.04306	Construction of Additional Classroom Poschim Charakhal GPS under NBIDNNGPS in Indurkani Upazila Perojpur	05/07/2021 12.00	05/07/2021 13.00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered banks branches. All other information is given in e-GP Notice. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP helpdesk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

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GD-1197

The Security Printing Corporation (Bangladesh) Ltd.

Gazipur-1703

e-Tender Notice for procurement of the following items for The Security Printing Corporation (Bangladesh) Ltd., Gazipur as per e-Tender schedule.

Name of the items of e-Tender for procurement:

1. e-Tender for supply of 8,640 kgs. Iso-propyl Alcohol.
2. e-Tender for supply of 1,035 packets White Card Board and 55 reams White Paper.

For details, please visit our website:

Website : www.spcbl.org.bd
Telephone : 88-02-9205110-15, 9205116
Mobile : 88-01534002183 & 88-01911064896
Fax : 88-02-9205108, 9205109
E-mail : info@spcbl.org.bd
Tender site : <https://spcbletender.bb.org.bd>

Syed Amjad Hossain
General Manager (Local Purchase & Sales)
Phone: 88-02-9204405

GD-1196