

Enough with project irregularities

Without accountability, time and cost overruns in development projects will continue unabated

WE are tired of writing in these columns about cases of time and cost overruns, which seem to have become the norm when it comes to the development projects in Bangladesh. We can only imagine how exhausting it is for the relevant authorities to constantly issue warnings to ministries, departments and officials responsible for these irregularities—only for that to fall on deaf ears.

Despite repeated requests and warnings from the prime minister herself—who, in February this year, directed the authorities to take legal action against those responsible for flawed project designs that ultimately push up costs—not much seems to have changed. On Tuesday, a parliamentary watchdog came down heavily on the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD) over the irregularities reported in different development projects, including slow implementation, repeated extensions of deadlines, and consequent increase in project costs.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Estimates sought explanations as to why RTHD projects in the Dhaka, Sylhet, Mymensingh and Gopalganj zones were not implemented on time, and why their durations were increased repeatedly. It is astounding to learn that, in most cases, the officials did not even respond properly to the concerns raised. According to a report published by this daily, they tried to deflect by explaining that deadline extensions did not lead to increased expenditures. But why do such extensions continue to be asked for? Data suggests that in the last fiscal year alone, more than 300 projects sought time extensions. This state of affairs is not acceptable.

We are equally disappointed to hear that the only action that the committee took was to request the RTHD to submit a report explaining the reasons for extending the duration of nine incomplete projects in the Dhaka zone. How many more such reports will be submitted while these projects drag on, wasting crucial taxpayers' resources and depriving citizens of their expected benefits?

The need of the hour is accountability, and that will not come out of writing endless reports. It is high time that the legal action mentioned by the prime minister earlier this year is actually taken against officials who are responsible for project delays and cost overruns. If strong actions are not taken to enforce accountability, there will be no changes in the culture of delay in publicly funded projects that has currently become the norm in Bangladesh.

High time to diversify our export basket

Govt and private sector should work together to formulate long-term strategies

WE second the prime minister's call to private entrepreneurs on Tuesday to try and diversify Bangladesh's export items. For far too long, we have been overly reliant on our RMG export—accounting for more than 80 percent of our total exports—which puts our balance of payment (BOP) situation at risk, as any significant decline in RMG export could lead to huge BOP deficits. Thus, experts have been calling on the private sector for some time to take initiatives to diversify export items, and for the government to formulate policies that encourage export diversification.

Broadening the export product base, destination and quality can stabilise and expand export revenues and boost economic growth. That, in turn, can lead to the much-needed creation of more jobs. As Bangladesh graduates from the UN's list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the need for it to diversify its export basket becomes even more pressing. Many of the benefits it used to receive as an LDC will become redundant or unavailable after graduation. In order to make up for some of the potential losses, Bangladesh needs to formulate long-term plans on how to enhance its export basket.

Some of the measures, as previously highlighted by experts, could be for the government to provide low cost and easy access to finance, adequate policy support along with fiscal and non-fiscal incentives for non-garment export sectors, while ensuring equal treatment and sufficient skills development. When it comes to the RMG sector, Bangladesh, over the years, has enforced domestic regulations that are WTO-compliant and internationally acceptable. The same has to happen for other sectors if their products are to succeed in the international market. In line with that, the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) needs to be strengthened to ensure that local products face international standard testing to secure accreditation where necessary.

The private sector also has a big role to play here. Our businesses need to conduct proper market research to find out which products they can successfully export, as well as how they can diversify their export markets. They can also work with the government to try and find out which countries or group of countries Bangladesh should sign free trade agreements with, to increase trade and overall exports.

Returnee female migrants need help to bounce back in life



NAZNIN TITHI

THERE is hardly any positive news about our female migrant workers employed in the Middle East or those who have returned home from there. Horrifying facts of their lives

abroad often make headlines when they are physically and sexually assaulted by their employers, left unfed for days, and deprived of decent salaries. Between 2016 and 2019, the dead bodies of approximately 500 female migrants were returned to Bangladesh. The innocent faces of 14-year-old Kulsum and 13-year-old Nodi—who were sent to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers and returned in coffins after a year or so—are still etched in our minds. Many of the women who

returnee female migrants' socio-economic conditions at present. According to the study, 60.4 percent of them are now unemployed, while 65 percent don't have a regular monthly income. Moreover, 61 percent of them are plagued with huge debts, which have made them even more vulnerable in their families.

These women went abroad borrowing money from lenders, while many had to sell their properties. When they started their journey to the foreign lands, they did not have the slightest idea that they would have to endure such abuse there and would have to return home so soon. Being forced to come back prematurely, their economic condition deteriorated further. A majority of them now can't find any jobs here as employment opportunities have declined in their communities as well, as reported by some 30 percent of the returnees interviewed for the study. Those who have found work are doing different jobs from what they did abroad. Moreover,

of the stigma of being sexually abused abroad. People often make slanderous comments referring to their "immoral character." Due to this vicious social attitude, many of the returnees have been forced to confine themselves at home, further compounding their feelings of humiliation and rejection.

Another shocking revelation is that female returnee migrants are also having trouble in their married life. According to the study, 14.7 percent of the returnee

These women went abroad borrowing money from lenders, while many had to sell their properties.



Since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, about 49,924 Bangladeshi female migrant workers returned home from 21 countries till March 7, 2021.

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AFP

came back alive had scars of torture on their bodies and were in vulnerable mental states. Only a few of them managed to make it back in good physical and mental conditions.

After the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, about 49,924 female migrant workers returned home from 21 countries till March 7 this year, according to Brac Migration Programme. How are they doing in their own country now?

A recent study titled "Social and Economic Reintegration of the Returnee Female Migrant Workers: Success and Sorrows," conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), has found some shocking facts about our

there is a wage discrepancy—54.2 percent of the female returnees surveyed reported unequal pay between returnee and non-returnee workers.

Upon returning home, they have also been experiencing a change of social attitude towards them. While they were abroad, sending their hard-earned money back home, they were respected and considered "empowered" by their communities. They also had the decision-making power in their families. However, after their return, they have lost that power and their opinions no longer matter to their families, according to the study. They are also looked down upon by their communities because

female migrants got divorced, while 10.5 percent were simply left by their husbands.

This is more or less the situation of most of our female returnee migrants, but there are also those who have significantly improved their socio-economic conditions, even though they are a small minority.

Now, the pertinent questions are: How can we help these women to reintegrate into society again? What can we do to improve their socio-economic status so that they can live a respectable life? How can we sensitise the communities towards the returnees, especially those who have suffered physical, psychological, and sexual abuse abroad?

Experts say that we still do not have any specific policy to reintegrate female migrants into society. Manirul Islam, deputy director of research at BILS, said, "In order to provide our female returnees any kind of support, the authorities concerned should register their names first. Without a proper database, it is difficult to keep track of the returnees and provide them with any financial or social support or the treatment they need."

So, first and foremost, female returnee migrants need to be registered and brought under the government's social safety net programmes. The returnees should also get the necessary treatment without hassle. Most of our female returnees were physically and mentally unwell when they returned—55 percent of them were physically unwell while 29 percent had some kind of a mental illness, as the BILS study has found. But most of them were not provided with any treatment for their conditions.

Providing them with skills development training to prepare them for income-generating activities comes next. It should not be very difficult for the relevant government agencies to arrange such training in line with the demand of the job market. The money from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund, formed with the contributions of the migrant workers, can be utilised in this regard. After all, what is it for if not to help migrant workers, current or former, in distress? The returnees who would prefer to start their own business should be able to get loans at low interest rates. We know that the Probashi Kalyan Bank offers loan facilities to migrant workers, but the process is too complicated for the female returnee migrants, given their social and educational backgrounds. They also need support in this regard. Those who are already engaged in various jobs must be paid as much as their non-migrant co-workers. For this, the authorities should maintain the minimum wage structure.

Understandably, when these women are reemployed or engaged in other income-generating activities, their communities' attitudes towards them will also change. But there still needs to be a protection cell for them, where they can go and file complaints when and if they are socially harassed by people. Sensitising the communities about their struggles and raising awareness about the contributions they made to our society are also crucial.

Since migration is the second largest source of women's employment and empowerment after the RMG sector, the government should do everything in its power to ensure the safety of our women migrant workers. It should sign better agreements with the countries where our female workers are employed, with a focus on their physical and mental well-being. There are many problems related to female migration that need to be identified and fixed with urgency.

However, since our women migrants usually serve a couple of years abroad and then return, the government should also focus on their social, economic, and psychosocial reintegration into society once they come back home. Other labour-sending countries are already much advanced in this regard. It's time we took this issue seriously to ensure a better life for our female returnee migrants. With proper support from the government and the relevant agencies, they can overcome all the social barriers and get back on their feet.

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For development, democratisation of governance is a must



SHAZZAD KHAN

FOR development workers, especially those working for the rights and entitlements of the poor and vulnerable, a common question we face is how we should go about

improving governance in Bangladesh. The term "governance" comes up in every step of our work when we engage our project participants in demanding their rights from service-providing public institutions. We call them the "supply side" and our beneficiaries the "demand side."

Under the rights umbrella in a state mechanism, this is a core and common relationship: the demand side, or citizens, pays money to the state through taxes, and in return, the state, as the supply side, is obligated to render services to the citizens. Simply put, this give-and-take relationship is called governance. Now, if you pay money, but the state does not provide its services to you properly, it is bad governance on the state's part. And if the state renders its services to you, but you do not pay your dues, it is bad governance on your part.

This article is not aimed at raising a discourse on governance, per se—which has been the subject of so many definitions and discussions, and frankly, which has become a bit trite. But for the rights workers, they plainly take it as the decision-making process by the state's government functionaries for the judicious use of public money to provide optimum, effective, and efficient services to its citizens. If there is any deviation in this format, they say the governance is bad. It is enough for our understanding beyond academic discourse.

Now, how is our governance? As rights workers, we try to find out, during our work, what level of corruption we are dealing with, because governance and corruption have a correlation—if governance is bad, corruption is high, and if corruption is high, governance will certainly be bad. Unfortunately, we are in a state of endemic corruption, which means we are badly devoid of good governance.

As rights workers, we have to take bad governance seriously, because without

good governance, the rightful entitlement of the poor and vulnerable cannot be met. And if it is so, then all our development funds and efforts will go in vain, and the poor and vulnerable will remain where they are. So there is no alternative to improving our governance.

In an attempt to find out how we can improve our governance, we do a simple correlation among some well-defined indexes of two countries: Bangladesh as a country of endemic corruption, and Denmark as a country with the least corruption in the world. We have drawn upon some facts and figures based on the recent global indexes (2019-20), which show both positive and negative correlations among these two countries

enjoys full democracy, while Bangladesh has scored 5.88, meaning it is in a hybrid regime status. Denmark is the 10th best country on the Human Development Index (HDI), while Bangladesh is 133rd out of 189 countries. Denmark's tax-GDP ratio is 46, while Bangladesh's ratio is only 12.

From all this information, one can easily conclude that if you have a strong democracy, you will have the lowest level of corruption and high-performing governance. At the same time, you will enjoy super human development status supported by strong tax justice. In Denmark, their tax justice is based upon progressive imposition of taxes on all citizens based on their income. As a



Good governance ensures sustainable development with low levels of corruption.

ILLUSTRATION:
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and can lead us to a credible solution.

We also choose Denmark because it is one of the leading trendsetters in all global indexes of development. For example, its global governance score is 95, while Bangladesh's score is 21 only. Denmark's score on the corruption index is 88—the highest—denoting that the country is the least corrupt, while Bangladesh's score is 26, putting it at the 146th position among 180 countries. In the inequality index, Denmark's Gini Coefficient is 0.25 (least) while Bangladesh's is 0.52—the less the score between 0-1, the less the inequality. In the global democracy index, Denmark has scored 9.22 out of 10, meaning it

result, Denmark has the lowest inequality in the world.

For Denmark, this has been possible because they have shaped up their governance based on a strong democracy. If we are able to democratise our governance system like Denmark, then we can have better governance and less corruption in the delivery of services. This will lead to formulating a pro-people fiscal policy with higher allocation for healthcare, education, and social security; the existing allocation is far too less compared to the leading democratic countries.

In a fully democratic system, public representatives have to remain

accountable and transparent to people; hence, they exert their full responsibility on the service-providing institutions under their authority to render services to people. Unless they do so, people remove them through the process of free and fair elections and bring in new persons of choice. This accountability mechanism is very strong in most democratic countries, such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Canada, etc. The countries that fall under flawed democracy as per the democracy index show anomalies in voting and the provision of services to people. Some typical examples of these countries are India, the US, Brazil, Malaysia, France, etc. In terms of the democracy index, as Bangladesh falls under the hybrid regime, one can realise the quality of accountability and transparency of the public representatives and service-providing institutions to people. We face the crude reflections of this in our everyday lives through the instances of failure in our governance system. Therefore, it is imperative that we take the democratisation of governance in Bangladesh as our key agenda.

If we really believe in the motto of "leaving no one behind," embracing the poor and vulnerable people in the development arena, then there is no alternative for the donors, partners, CSOs, NGOs and the United Nations organisations to set their agenda and mandate towards drastic political reform and a strong local government system in Bangladesh. The means of doing so may be robust civic engagement and vigilance, political education, aggressive advocacy, public disclosure, capacity building of CSOs and NGOs, higher fiscal budget, and strong IT infrastructure. This will also require strong political consensus and commitment, and those in power must lead the way.

A country with a democratic spirit must not live with the stigma of a hybrid regime—which is an unbearable shame for its citizens—and with the global indexes that say we are extremely corrupt with utterly poor governance. All actors of development must take on the key overarching agenda of democratising governance in Bangladesh, and formulate all relevant policies and programmes in line with that goal.

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