

A little bit of accountability can go a long way

The culture of time and cost overruns in public projects must stop

WE are baffled by the continued failure of public authorities leading to frequent cost and time overruns in various projects, despite the prime minister's clear directives in the past to check questionable project revisions—including the directive that a project cannot be revised more than three times. As the prime minister-led Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) convened its first meeting of the year, seven of the 10 projects placed at the meeting were set for revisions. According to a report by this newspaper on January 4, when the 10 projects tabled at the meeting were first conceived, they were supposed to cost Tk 3,099 crore. Now that has ballooned up to Tk 14,961 crore.

In terms of time, the authorities sought extensions ranging from a year to a full decade for some of the projects—and that, too, after several revisions. For instance, one of the seven projects—the Ashrayan-2 project to alleviate poverty and homelessness—was taken up in 2010 for completion in June 2014. It has gone through three revisions and is now seeking extra time and money again. The project was initially estimated to cost Tk 1,169.18 crore, but that has now increased to a massive Tk 11,142.8 crore. Another project called BEPZA Economic Zone Mirsarai-1st Phase, which is aimed at attracting domestic and foreign investment, is seeking additional expenditure of Tk 552 crore and two more years; the original project cost was Tk 750 crore and the completion date was June last year.

That the authorities have asked for such a massive increase in expenditures at the first meeting of the year is deplorable. Similarly, the delay we see in project completion year after year is truly shocking. Besides the cost increase that it leads to—which the taxpayers have to bear—and the benefit that it deprives the people of, the fact that the authorities have failed to make any improvements despite the PM's directives is unacceptable. And the reason for this, we believe, is the lack of accountability that we see when it comes to repeated project revisions. We have barely—if ever—seen any of the public officials or private consultants involved in these delayed projects being reprimanded in any way, shape or form. That must change if such huge time/cost overruns are to be avoided.

In line with that, we call on the government to get the message across to all project officials that they must change their business-as-usual attitude. And if they don't, they should be held accountable for failing to deliver to the public what they promise in their initial project proposals.

Urgent measures needed for workplace safety

Employers must be held accountable and subject to regular inspections

A recent survey by the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment (OSHE) Foundation has revealed what we already know to be true—workplace safety in the country, especially in the informal sector, is a sham. In 2021, the number of deaths due to workplace accidents was 853, while the number of serious injuries stood at 236. Of the deceased, a staggering 792 were workers from the informal sector. The findings were based on reports from 15 national newspapers, seven local newspapers, and information gathered from the spot by the organisation. However, there is no doubt that many such incidents have gone unreported, and that the real number may be even more horrifying.

One need not look back too far into the past to realise just how callous working conditions in Bangladesh can be, which lead to such heavy casualties. On July 8, 2021, a deadly fire at the Hashem Foods factory in Rupganj, Narayanganj claimed the lives of 54 people, 17 of whom were children. Many have termed this a "murder," because workers could not escape the fire as the factory authorities had blocked the only exit of the building from outside. Such tactics can be seen across industries, with deaths or injuries routinely reported in ship breaking yards, garment factories, construction industry, brick fields, steel mills, etc. Though the tragic Rana Plaza collapse of 2013 had made the government amend the Labour Act, many workers continue to suffer due to their sectors not being counted as part of the formal economy. Not only do they lose out on due benefits—as happened during Covid-enforced closures—but many lose their lives as well due to the lack of proper rules and regulations to protect them.

Ensuring the safety of workers, especially in the informal sector, is a hefty task that the government needs to carry out on a priority basis. Risky sectors need to have health and safety committees, which will ensure that the working conditions at factories and such establishments are not dangerous, and will carry out regular inspections to keep non-conforming firms in check. Additionally, a proper legal framework needs to be in place to protect workers and ensure justice for them, while holding employers to account for any negligence. Workers' lives are hard enough, what with the unfavourable working conditions and meagre wages. Being fatally injured at work should not be something they need to worry about on top of everything else.

Making the most of our e-commerce sector



A CLOSER LOOK
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THE e-commerce sector of Bangladesh witnessed significant growth since the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020. This growth, however, was not to last long. From mid-2021, the sector was mired in controversy surrounding scams by multiple actors—including Evaly, Eorange, Alesha Mart, and Dhamaka. These e-commerce players offered unsustainable and unrealistic discounts and cashback offers on advance payment to lure customers, and then failed to deliver the products or return the customers' money, or even pay the merchants.

As a result, customer confidence in the overall e-commerce sector has taken a hit, leading to a substantial decline in transactions. A local daily, citing a Bangladesh Bank e-commerce transactions report, revealed that transactions in October 2021 witnessed a 41.53 percent fall—to Tk 743 crore—in comparison to the transaction in June 2021, when it was Tk 1,277.4 crore.

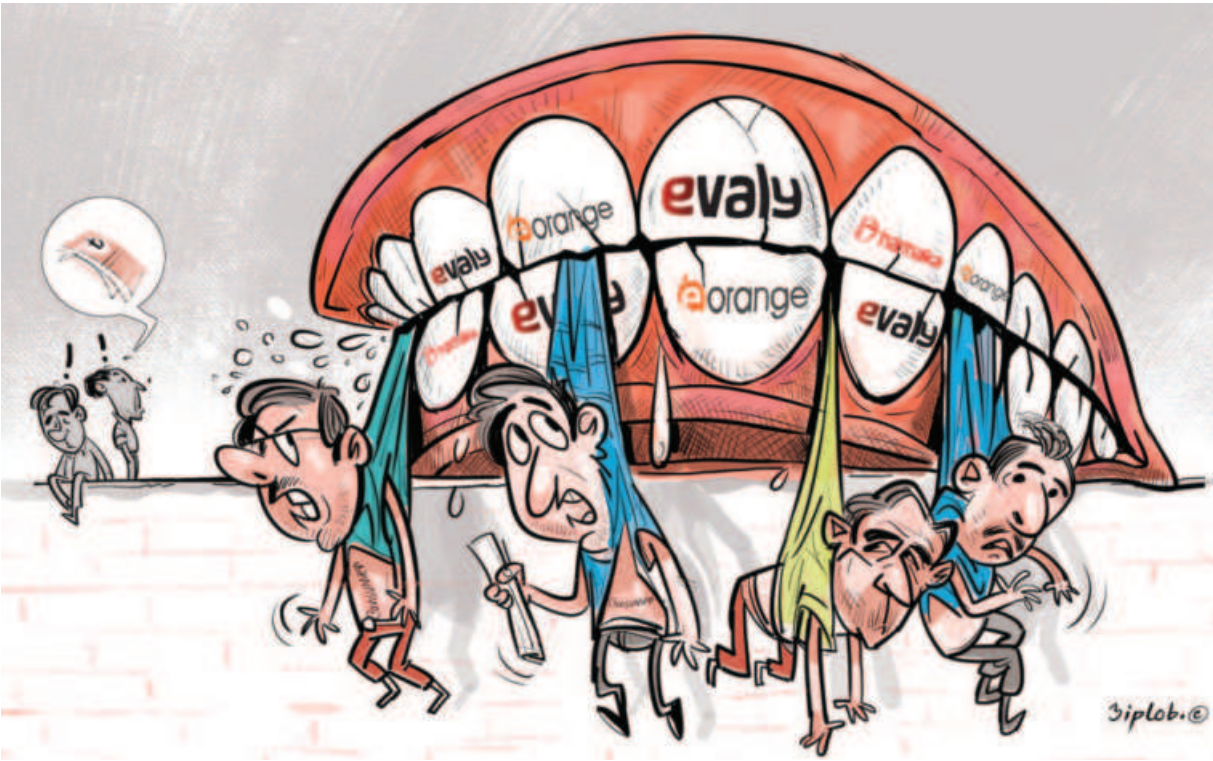
In addition, the authorities' failure to stop the misadventures of the unscrupulous players on time (despite these having been reported multiple times since the end of 2020), lack of a concrete policy framework to regulate the sector, and the authorities' inability to trace the customers' money and ensure refund have also added to the customers' fears, many of whom now feel uncomfortable making online purchase.

While these scams still remain a major concern for the authorities, they must now also focus on taking preventive and curative measures to bring the e-commerce sector back on the growth trajectory, which, according to a November 2020 forecast, was anticipated to be worth USD 3 billion by 2023.

One of the first steps in this regard should be to track the money trail to be able to refund the affected parties. The financial regulators, especially Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU), should take a closer look at the money laundering aspect.

It has recently been reported that the managing director of Dhamaka had transferred Tk 84 crore to his personal account from advance payments the platform had received from the customers.

SMD Jasim Uddin Chishti, Dhamaka's managing director, also lent Tk 25 crore to other companies he owns, in addition to misappropriating Tk 20 crore, in the name of software procurement. The company, now having only Tk 45.28 lakh in its account, had taken Tk 736 crore as advance payment from its customers, and paid only Tk 557 crore to the merchants. The company now owes Tk 480 crore



▲ ILLUSTRATION:
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to its customers and the merchants. Evaly, Eorange, and others have similarly conned their customers and merchants and owe them crores of taka.

Now the question is: Where is the missing money? Is the money still within the country? Where in the system are the loopholes, because these multiple cases could not have been the result of chance

services and banks facilitating online, cashless payments, e-commerce has become a more convenient marketplace. We need to utilise these opportunities.

For now, the commerce ministry has issued the Digital Commerce Operation Guidelines, 2021, pursuant to the National Digital Commerce Policy, 2018 (as amended in 2020), in order to ensure

or coincidence? Why could the regulatory and law enforcement bodies not identify the problems earlier? Why did the authorities not take preventive measures before?

More importantly, who are the primary and secondary beneficiaries of these scams? By beneficiaries, I mean not only Dhamaka's SMD Jasim Uddin Chishti, or Evaly CEO Mohammad Rassel, and his wife and company chairman, Shamima Nasrin, but the masterminds who moved the pawns from behind the curtains—if there are any—and every single individual, body or syndicate who have benefitted from these scams—whoever they may be or however politically well-connected they are.

These are questions that need to be thoroughly scrutinised by unbiased relevant agencies, because in a corrupt system that enables such scams to go on for months, not a single page should remain unturned in order to identify the rotten elements that are eating at the core of the system, making it dysfunctional and ineffective. The answer to these questions would not only help in tracing the money trail, but would also help in formulating a comprehensive policy framework that would safeguard the interests of not only the customers or the e-commerce players, but the sector overall.

With the pandemic set to stay for the long haul, e-commerce has become one of the preferred options for customers worldwide. And with mobile financial

transparency and accountability in the sector, among other objectives. And while the guidelines are comprehensive in nature, its effectiveness will only depend on how well these are being enforced. If the regulators and law enforcers apply the guidelines selectively, it will be a self-defeating act and will only be detrimental to the growth of the e-commerce sector.

"While the Digital Commerce Operation Guidelines, 2021 is a welcome move in the face of the crisis we have been through, we must keep in mind that it is only a stop-gap measure. In order to truly create a conducive environment for long-term growth and much-needed sustainability of the e-commerce industry, the government, in alignment with its high profile aspiration of creating a Digital Bangladesh, must focus on formulating a comprehensive policy framework, which will also define the roles and responsibilities of each actor involved, especially to ensure proper implementation," suggested Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) while talking to this writer. He added that it is also important that relevant stakeholders are involved in developing such a policy.

As we move forward in 2022, with the aim to create a bigger scope for the e-commerce sector, we need to take learnings from the setbacks of 2021, and reset the system to make the most of what this sector has to offer.

How do we reach 2030 climate goals?



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
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THE year 2030 is the target year for the world to achieve all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. In addition to the SDGs, 2030 is also the year by which all countries party to the Paris Agreement on climate change must keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius, as well as achieve the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA).

At the same time, the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) held in 2021 has launched a series of initiatives to change the food systems nationally as well as globally, to make them more resilient by 2030.

Another initiative of note is the Race to Resilience (R2R) campaign launched by the high-level champions of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is bringing together non-state actors from around the world to enhance the overall resilience of society in the face of adverse impacts from human-induced climate change that are going to get only worse by the day.

As we have entered the era of loss and damage caused by human-induced climate change, we need to tackle these issues as true emergencies, rather than simply tinkering with reform around the edges. The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated what a global crisis looks

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like, as well as the need for all countries to work together to effectively combat it.

Every single one of us needs to consider ourselves the citizens of Planet Earth first, and our respective countries second. Almost all the major problems facing humanity now are global in nature, and cannot be solved within national boundaries anymore. Hence, we all need to think globally while acting locally.

Another important shift needed in our thinking is for every sector and organisation to make it their own responsibility to actively participate in tackling climate change—rather than simply leave it to the government. This is now known as a "whole-of-society" approach, taken to tackle major issues. This approach is the way to go if we are to have any chance of tackling the global challenges we currently face. This means that every organisation—from schools to companies, from NGOs to media houses—has to undertake its own analysis of what can be done regarding climate change, and then commit to actions themselves to contribute to the greater climate action.

The third important task regarding the climate emergency is to confront the forces who are causing the problems—which includes fossil fuel companies as well as certain governments and media outlets who protect them. These forces of the status quo now need to be challenged at every level. This will require criminalising their behaviour both at national and global levels. From now on, polluting companies must be forced to pay for the loss and damage they have caused and profited from. It is now very clear that these companies knowingly caused the damage; now, they must face the consequences.

Every country in the world needs to

make these three transitions as quickly as possible in order to enable their citizens to tackle the crisis adequately. In Bangladesh, we have a number of major opportunities for us to make these transitions quicker than others.

The first big transition we have coming up is our graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in 2026. This means that we will no longer be eligible for grants and concessional loans, and will have to compete in the open global economy. This is a major achievement for the government as well as the people of Bangladesh. But it will certainly create a shock, which we must be prepared to overcome.

The Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPPI), with its 10-year goal to achieve prosperity for the country in the face of adverse impacts of climate change, takes a whole-of-society approach to enable all sectors, organisations and even individuals to play their respective roles in achieving the desired prosperity by 2030. At the same time, it is important to focus on the role that local communities—including households and even individuals—can and must play to tackle the climate impacts. This is known as Locally Led Adaptation (LLA), in which Bangladesh has already been acknowledged as a global leader. We need to build on this—not just for ourselves, but for us to share our knowledge and experience with other countries as well.

Finally, we must invest in our young girls and boys who are by far our biggest asset. We have to help them become creative, innovative and successful adults. Each year that we fail to do so is another wasted year, and there are only nine years left until 2030. We need to act as swiftly as possible; there is no time to lose.