

Habitual revision of projects must stop

Govt should rethink how projects are planned and executed

We are alarmed to learn of the enormous cost citizens are having to pay for the habitual revision of ill-planned and ill-executed government projects. There is a real image now to be attached to this revising spree. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, if we put together all the additional allocations approved for revised projects in this fiscal year so far, it would be enough to fund the construction of two Padma Bridges (the bridge cost Tk 30,192 crore). That’s until February 8, when the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) approved four project revisions, in addition to the 28 approved before, bringing the combined total of additional costs to nearly Tk 60,000 crore. That’s how much money being thrown down the drain simply because the government couldn’t ensure timely and smooth implementation of its development projects. Let that sink in.

We have repeatedly expressed concerns about this habitual revision of projects, particularly the implementation procedures of the ministries involved that lead to frequent time and cost overruns. Even Ecneec Chairperson and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also expressed her dissatisfaction on several occasions, and gave clear directives to check this vicious cycle—including one that a project cannot be revised more than three times. But all warnings seem to be falling on deaf ears.

While the reasons for revisions may vary from one project to another, there are some common factors like absence of proper feasibility studies, complexities in land acquisition, and lengthy procurement process, according to experts and officials. The presence of these bottlenecks and others causes problems at every stage of the implementation, sometimes even before a project gets underway. For example, it takes at least two years to pass the development project proposal (DPP). Add to that delays in the bidding process. Due to the time taken to get the projects approved and started, the estimates based on which the proposals are prepared often become dated, necessitating additional funds. There can be unforeseeable challenges (like the outbreak of the pandemic) too, but most of the challenges faced are procedural. Throw corruption into the mix, and you have a problem that is not a problem for those profiting off it.

We think without fixing how the public authorities go about planning and implementing their projects, and without ensuring greater accountability every step of the way, we cannot get rid of this revision culture. As well as the extra money that citizens have to pay for this every year, there is another cost that is often ignored—prolonged public suffering. Considering all this, the government must take this problem without the seriousness it deserves and take prudent measures to enhance the implementation capabilities of the ministries involved and punish those responsible for the costly delays.

Watch out for ATM fraud

Police, banks must be vigilant against transnational scammers

IT’S disquieting to learn that a transnational syndicate is involved in stealing money from the ATMs of local banks. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police’s Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit recently arrested some members of this syndicate, including its alleged mastermind Hakan Zamburkhan, a Turkish citizen. Reportedly, he along with some Indian and Bangladeshi nationals have long been carrying out their fraudulent activities in the country. Hakan visited Bangladesh at least six times over the last five years. Last month, he went to several ATM booths of Eastern Bank Limited and tried to withdraw money about 84 times using cloned cards of at least 40 countries. However, his attempts were foiled by the anti-skimming technology installed by the bank.

In a confessional statement given by Hakan, the detailed procedure of how the gang operated was revealed. It was known that the gang had members in India, Pakistan, Mexico, Bulgaria, Bangladesh and Turkey. The CTTC investigation also found that Hakan, along with another Turkish national and two Bangladeshis, were arrested in India’s Assam in 2019 for stealing around Tk 10 lakh rupees through such fraudulence.

Since the first incident of ATM card fraud was reported in the country in 2016, several such incidents have come to light. In all the cases, the involvement of foreign nationals was found. They used not only cloned cards but also other advanced technologies to steal people’s money without leaving any trace. Reportedly, some Bangladeshi nationals also took training on cloning credit cards in foreign countries such as Russia.

We appreciate the efforts of the CTTC unit so far and hope that all other members of the gang will soon be apprehended. Since Hakan is one of the masterminds of this international ATM card skimming gang, police should immediately request other countries as well as the Interpol to provide them necessary information on their operations, which will help prevent such incidents in the future.

Meanwhile, all our banks must have the modern technologies needed to foil any such attempts of ATM fraud. The latest attempt to steal money from the ATMs of Eastern Bank Limited failed only because it had a robust security system in place. All our banks should learn from this incident and protect themselves by installing anti-malware and anti-skimming systems and by addressing any existing system vulnerabilities.

Schools should remain open—then what?



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SCHOOLS re-opened on September 12 last year on a limited basis after 542 days of closure. The wave of the new Omicron variant prompted another shut-down on January 21 this year, which has now been extended to February 21. Educationists, most health experts and UNICEF have argued that the risks of keeping schools closed are far greater than the benefits of protecting students by keeping them away from school. But not much is being said about what should happen in schools if they are kept open. It is not clear what will be done to help children overcome the serious learning loss that places most of them in what has been called a “generational catastrophe.”

Is it hyperbolic to say the new generation—students currently at different levels of education—is facing an educational disaster that will affect them and the nation for a generation? Indermit Gill, senior fellow at Brookings Institution, and Jaime Saavedra, senior director at World Bank, wrote recently that learning poverty, defined as 10-year-olds not acquiring basic reading skills, is likely to increase dramatically due to the educational impact of the pandemic. The average low- or middle-income country’s learning poverty level is likely to increase from the pre-Covid level of 53 percent to 70 percent, “unless swift and bold action is taken.” (Brookings, “We are losing a generation,” January 28, 2022.)

From a typical Bangladeshi student’s perspective, an 8-year-old who was in Class Three at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 attended Class Four when schools re-opened on September 12, 2021 and was promoted to Class Five at age 10 in January this year. The child barely received any classroom instruction during this whole period. It is well-recognised that the efforts to engage students in learning through a distanced mode, by assigning homework or through teachers’ contact, though commendable as initiatives, were not of much help for the large majority of students. The typical student is now expected to receive lessons from their Class Five syllabus, for which they are not ready. The exam system—based essentially on memorising notebooks and guidebooks, and being encouraged by class teachers



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PHOTO: STAR

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and private tutors—will probably let students continue to be promoted to higher classes. Their learning deficits will continue to accumulate and widen. They will become school graduates with certificates but without the expected basic competencies for life, further education and work—an unwanted outcome for children and the nation.

Anticipating the problem, concerned educationists made four-point recommendations for learning recovery when schools reopened in September. These included: a) rapid assessment of grade-level readiness of students in Bangla and math at the primary school level and Bangla, English, math and science at the secondary level; b) helping schools and teachers to implement an intensive and accelerated remedial programme for these core subjects and foregoing the public exams at the end of Classes Five and Eight; c) guiding and assisting teachers to conduct the remedial lessons with online and in-person support; and d) extending the 2021 school year till June 2022 and changing the school calendar permanently as part of a two-to-three-year recovery plan.

Unfortunately, the authorities paid no heed to these ideas and insisted on sticking to their plan of going back to the pre-Covid normal routine, with not much success so far. The proposed learning recovery strategy remains relevant and necessary. The profound impact of the pandemic—which is not yet over—cannot just be ignored.

The difficulties are compounded by a pandemic of indecision and inefficiency. The decision to bring students of 12 to 17 years under the vaccine coverage came late. The bureaucratic hurdles of registration, documentation requirements, and the inadequate logistics of the inoculation being available in an accessible way in each institution still leave most students without vaccines.

This should have been a priority when schools opened in September. The schools are not better prepared today than a year ago with a systematic plan to apply a blended approach of combining digital and in-person learning. The inefficiency and indecision perhaps also have led to decision-makers ignoring the recovery recommendations.

For the sake of efficient, timely, and crisis-solving response to this unprecedented situation, it has to be first admitted that a real crisis exists that requires imaginative action. Three points warrant attention in a crisis-response mode.

First, in the crisis-response mode, some regular normal activities will have to be put on the back-burner to give priority to the learning recovery plan consisting of the key elements noted above. The curriculum revision and rolling out of the new curriculum, for instance, should be put on hold. The curriculum board instead needs to concentrate on the recovery plan, such as the tools for rapid assessment of core competencies, designing a remedial plan and assisting schools and teachers to implement it. At the same time, as much as possible, urgent actions should be formulated keeping in view the longer-term goals. The board should work with academia and education-focused NGOs in this effort.

Secondly, the recovery plan has to be customised for different levels of education—early childhood and preschool, primary, secondary, colleges and university. There are also specific needs for technical and vocational education, non-formal education, madrasa education and private universities. Needs and prospects for the blended approach should be different for each of these levels and types.

Thirdly, the crisis responses, to be designed in a coordinated and holistic manner and with an eye for longer-term goals, are better done through a transparent and participatory mechanism. Main stakeholders—NGOs, academia, teachers’ organisations, parents—should be involved in the mechanism at national and local levels. A communicative approach should help keep the public informed of the goals and strategies, and the process of decision-making.

The critical question is how the students’ presence in schools—at some risk to their health, and to the health of their teachers and families—can be made worthwhile for students from the point-of-view of learning recovery and students’ social and emotional wellbeing.

Rules for Renaming

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WHEN Shakespeare wrote, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” he meant that the essence of something is not determined by its label. Calling a plum a pear does not make it taste any different.

Names do have some meaning, of course. The names of Civil War generals, ex-presidents, the Sacklers (of opioid fame), and the Washington, DC, football team have been removed, refused, challenged, or changed. No reasonable person today would take on the name Hider, or even Adolf for that matter.

Renaming controversies are everywhere nowadays. Battles over the names of teams and schools are especially intense. There have been many renamings of college and professional sports teams in the United States, in addition to disputes over the names attached to public buildings, streets, and other spaces. In many cases, people were attached to (or simply accustomed to) an old name—usually a Native American reference—that younger generations found upsetting.

In 2017, Yale University renamed Calhoun College because Senator John C. Calhoun’s support of states’ rights, slavery, and the nullification of federal law in the 1800s was found to be too offensive to be attached to such an important place. The college now carries the name of a pathbreaking computer scientist: Grace Murray Hopper.

Similarly, in 2020, Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School became the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

By contrast, the name of the US capital seems secure, even though George



▲ A “Rosa Parks Street” sign is seen on Wilson Street, in Minneapolis, Glasgow, on June 8, 2020 in the aftermath of protests against the death of George Floyd.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Washington was a slave owner. Indeed, many street and city names continue to memorialise people who can be associated with slavery.

The long-term question is whether any name is truly safe in the face of evolving norms and later objections. Virtually every name could eventually be associated with behaviour or beliefs that have become objectionable or deeply offensive, even if they were apparently admired or

rewarded in an earlier era. None of us can be certain that every position held now will stand the test of time.

Three solutions to renaming conundrums are worth considering. The first idea is associated with statutes of limitation in law. Names could be subject by convention to objection for a limited period, such as 50 years.

Under this approach, the State of Washington’s name is safe, even though Washington the man owned slaves. The country’s name is also safe, even though it is possible that a future generation will

recognise that America is a derivative of Amerigo (Vespucci), a fifteenth-century explorer who refused to hire women as sailors.

For better or worse, it often takes a long time for social values to change. The renamed Washington Commanders football team had its previous name, the Redskins, for more than 80 years. But for this proposed solution to be effective, the social convention needs to be so strong that, after the agreed interval has passed, it will seem wrong to object to a name, however offensive it becomes.

A second idea is to borrow from the concept of term limits. Names would have a shelf life, with an understanding that the controlling organisation could choose to extend the name for another period.

Consider a name that had been assigned because of a donation, as in the case of the Sackler Institute at New York University. Here, the understanding, perhaps embodied in new laws, would be that the university is free to sell the name to a bidder. Again, nothing stops a for-profit company, like a football team, from hanging on to its name. It is market pressure that brings about changes.

Finally, there is the idea of buyouts. If the original name was not “purchased,” a renaming in honor of a donor or public figure is easily accomplished. Nothing stopped Princeton from accepting a gift—from an individual or group—that was conditioned on removing Wilson’s name. This idea is not entirely novel. Theater venues and sports stadiums are often renamed for advertising purposes, and the corporate names attached to them usually come with term limits of a kind, by dint of the name being for sale.

As for sports teams, they presumably gain something from the long histories attached to their names. But if an old name is found to be offensive, a team and its critics can benefit by auctioning off a name change.

The virtue of these three approaches (which could be combined) is that each requires us to recognise that times change, that names can also change, and that some prescribed limits to renaming are possible.