

Budget needs to address inflation, return stability

Spend more on essentials, less on extravagance

AS the government makes its final preparations for the upcoming budget, we would like to remind the authorities of the unique challenges that it needs to address utilising the next budget. As the country recovers from the pandemic-induced losses, inflation has become a major challenge due to various external and perhaps also internal factors. However, it appears that the government is planning to formulate its next budget with the same mindset that it did prior to the pandemic.

During the past two fiscal years, the budget size grew only in single digit, which was a departure from what had previously become the norm. This time around, the government is looking to return to a budgetary growth of double digits. According to a finance ministry report, the budget will seek to bring inflation under control, attract investment, complete the implementation of the 28 stimulus packages, boost agricultural productivity particularly by incentivising farm mechanisation and enhance social security for the poor and the vulnerable. Although we agree with all of these goals, we cannot help but remain sceptical as to how they would be achieved—particularly in light of past government failures, despite lofty promises.

For example, the government stimulus packages introduced for small and medium enterprises have largely failed to achieve their goals. Small and medium businesses struggled to access the benefits of these government schemes throughout the whole pandemic. As for the social security programmes for the poor, time and again we have seen corruption eat away at them—resulting in influential and people close to power benefiting from them, rather than the poor who really needed them.

Moreover, it would not be wrong to say that the country has not yet fully recovered from the damage done by the pandemic. As huge numbers of people lost their jobs and education had literally come to a halt, the budget should focus on generating more employment—which the government was struggling to do even before the pandemic—and budgetary allocation for education has to be substantial. Due to various external circumstances, the government's foreign exchange reserve has dwindled in recent times, and there are some concerns in terms of the growing national debt—and the high cost of servicing them. Therefore, the government needs to utilise whatever resources it has at its disposal more prudently—something that the government, again, has failed at in the past.

As highlighted by experts, it would be best for the government to remain cautious when it comes to budgetary allocations. When it comes to human development related expenses, the government should spend more. However, it should cut back on unnecessary spending such as foreign tours by government officials and car imports for government officials in order to lower the pressure on the country's reserves. The traditional procedure of wasting valuable funds needs to be abandoned. More focus should instead be placed at effectively implementing essential government programmes, rather than creating lofty plans that the government does not have the capacity to follow through with.

The worst place to live in Dhaka?

DSCC must solve the problems facing East Jurain's residents

THE condition which the residents of East Jurain, under Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), have been living in for years is unbelievable. According to a report by this daily, round the year, waterlogging, mosquito infestation, dust pollution during dry season, unplanned urbanisation and the lack of a waste management system have made this area literally unliveable for its residents.

While many roads and houses of East Jurain remain submerged under filthy sewage water throughout the year—even without rain—dengue fever never leaves the neighbourhood as the waterlogged streets and abandoned homes have become the breeding ground of Aedes mosquitos. And while thick bouts of dust from uncontrolled construction works have made the air of the area unbreathable, the open drains have made it particularly risky for children, who have to play in the streets for lack of an open space or playground.

Reportedly, the waterlogging problem in the area started more than 20 years ago, but the authorities concerned did nothing to solve the problem. Rather, unplanned road construction and clogged sewerage systems have made the situation worse. According to East Jurain residents, DSCC has regularly been increasing the heights of the roads without considering the heights of the adjacent houses. While the residents believe that this is causing more waterlogging, the DSCC authorities claim that they have to do this to prevent runoff water from the nearby highways from flooding the area, as the main roads in the area are much higher than the roads going through this particular neighbourhood.

East Jurain is a classic example of what happens when unplanned urbanisation overtakes an area. Apparently, the entire neighbourhood has been developed by filling up many canals and low-lying floodplains adjacent to the DND embankment, which is the main reason for such persistent waterlogging. Without well-thought-out measures, these longstanding problems cannot be solved. And the responsibility to solve them falls primarily on DSCC authorities.

The DSCC, with help from other relevant authorities, must find a sustainable solution to the problems facing East Jurain. If the waterlogging problem can be solved, it will naturally eradicate the mosquito menace. And if the unnecessary road restoration work can be stopped, it will definitely lessen the air pollution in the area. Additionally, the DSCC must develop a proper waste management system and cover up the open drains. The residents of East Jurain are paying regular taxes to the DSCC; they definitely deserve a liveable neighbourhood in return.

Building social cohesion: How can education help?



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FRENCH sociologist Emile Durkheim described social cohesion as organic solidarity arising from peoples' dependence on each other in a modern society. But is social cohesion—i.e., fostering solidarity, mutual trust, shared aspirations and acceptance of diversity in society—a matter of concern? Does education have a role in building social cohesion?

Three major parallel streams of education in Bangladesh divide the nation, entrench social and economic disparities, and stand in the way of building an equitable, inclusive and united nation.

Education Minister Dipu Moni, and Dean of General Education at Brac University, Samia Huq, have raised the curtain on the problem in a recent article ("Social Cohesion through Education," Whiteboard, March 2022): "In Bangladesh, different streams of educational institutions have emerged with particular histories and purposes," they write. "The class selection and characteristics of each type of institution turn the students into different types of citizens."

The mainstream Bangla-medium, government and government-assisted schools enrol the majority of Bangladeshi school-going students. The madrasa system, with one stream receiving government support and the other being an independent Qawmi stream, serves a substantial minority of students. A small elite section of society sends their children to English-medium proprietary schools.

One aspect of unfairness is the low quality of schools for the majority of children. This majority includes madrasa students (both in Alia and Qawmi madrasas), and most students in mainstream Bangla schools (excepting an elite enclave of special institutions such as cadet colleges and the highly-selective private Bangla schools). Students in the mushrooming low-quality, commercial English-medium "kindergartens" (which often include secondary level classes) are also among the deprived.

The three different streams also prevent building a common foundation of knowledge, shared experience and cultivation of common values among young people. Children study and live in different worlds from each other. Opportunities and life prospects disproportionately favour children attending English-medium schools and the elite enclave of Bangla-medium schools.

Schools cannot remedy all social divisions, but they can help mitigate them using a shared curriculum. At present, schools reinforce these divisions and extend them to the next generation.



▲ Under the current divisive education system, children study and live in different worlds from each other, and many face unfairness and discrimination.

PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

Post-independence, the education policy report of the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission envisioned a unified school system with a common core curriculum in a Bangla-medium public system. English-medium private schools and madrasas would be exceptions.

Madrasa education was to follow the common curriculum at the primary stage

This structure has suited the political and economic elite and, consequently, there has been little interest in rocking the boat.

When religion becomes a central tenet of the political agenda—as in Pakistan, and increasingly in India—it does not augur well for nation-building or creating an equitable and inclusive education

and then become a vocational stream. The aim of madrasas would be to prepare people for religion-related occupations, rather than being a parallel system till university.

The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission report was ignored by the military rulers after 1975. Madrasas—both Alia and Qawmi—grew rapidly in the 1980s, as did the proprietary English-medium schools. Both enjoyed government patronage and encouragement. Post-1990 democratic governments, both the BNP-led and the Awami League-led coalitions, found it difficult or undesirable to try reversing the trend.

The 2010 National Education Policy espoused the goal of the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission of a unified public education system with equity and excellence. But it did not lay out specific guidelines for the major structural reform the system required to undo the three-way division that had become entrenched by then. Such a reversal called for major steps in financing, governance, curriculum development, pedagogy, teacher preparation and student assessment in the school system. An initiative of this scope and scale has not been taken.

The three major streams of education clearly parallel the larger divisions in society. The elite—representing business, political higher-ups, higher bureaucracy, and the higher echelons of the armed forces—patronise private English-medium schools. The middle and lower-middle mainstream send their children to government or government-supported Bangla-medium schools. The poor enrol their children in the Alia or Qawmi madrasas for reasons of affordability and/or due to religious motivation.

system to serve the nation's aspirations.

For example, the "safronisation" drive symbolising the Hindutva ideology of the current ruling regime in India has led to dropping the history of the Mughal period from the curriculum of secondary schools under the Central Secondary Education Board. Hindu mythology has been invoked to glorify the ancient scientific achievements of India.

In Bangladesh, we witnessed attempts to select and exclude literature and language content in school textbooks as a way of appeasing some religious groups, which was seen as an expedient in the electoral calculus. The growth of the two streams of madrasa as parallel systems rivalling the mainstream remains an intractable social cohesion challenge.

The questions raised are difficult and complex. The vision of the Qudrat-e-Khuda commission, with Bangabandhu's support, was to design an education system for independent Bangladesh guided by the pillars of the nation's constitution—democracy, nationalism, socialism, and secularism. This aim was derailed in 1975 and the pillars have become contested concepts in the last five decades.

The education minister and her co-writer have to be commended for flagging the challenge. And for posing the question: "How will teachers and learners engage with one another to live in pluralistic ways?"

The challenge for the policymakers and the citizenry is to reclaim the pillars of national ideology, render them a humane, progressive and contemporary meaning, and work on re-formulating educational purposes and practices based on these principles.

Bangladesh: A blueprint for sustainable supply chains



RMG NOTES Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).

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EVERYWHERE I go I hear the same maxim: sustainability is the only word forward for the fashion industry. Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) issues are at the forefront of investors' minds. I am not sure about that, as I think sometimes investors don't have the requisite knowledge to know what sustainability means when it comes to clothing production. That said, when the investment community begins to discuss these issues on a regular basis, we—as suppliers—must sit up and take notice.

Is sustainable clothing production even achievable? I certainly think it is possible to produce clothing with less environmental and social impact.

But what do we mean by the phrase "sustainable clothing production"? I'd like to explore what I believe this means and outline my own vision for how Bangladesh could become a blueprint for sustainable fashion value chains.

First, sustainable means more environmentally benign, in terms of our direct impact on the environment. This includes negative externalities, including the effluent our factories release. Is our effluent being treated properly before being released into the environment? Huge technological advances have been made in regards to effluent treatment in recent years, and many have been implemented

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in Bangladesh. But there is always more we can do, and there is no reason why every single garment factory in Bangladesh should not be integrated with state-of-the-art effluent treatment processes.

The second area for Bangladesh to pioneer in is direct production processes. The use of dyes and chemicals has historically been linked with high environmental load in garment supply chains. But there's no need for this. The past few years have seen huge advancements in the development and use of safer, less toxic dyes and chemicals, and the use of completely natural dyes.

As always, cost is an issue. Safer, cleaner dyes and chemicals are often more expensive. I am generalising here, but the point is that when a new, best-in-class range is launched, it is often charged at a premium. But to achieve cleaner supply chains, we must invest in these areas.

The third area is energy and water saving techniques. Bangladesh has yet to shift to renewable energy to any great degree in garment production. For our garment industry to shift to renewable energy, we need infrastructural investment at the national level. While renewable energy in Bangladesh is slowly picking up pace, its share in the total energy mix remains negligible. A recent report showed that, for 2020, wind and solar account for just three percent of the local electricity production.

We can and must change this picture. ESG investors are heavily focused on green investment. This has huge ramifications for fashion supply chains, and renewable energy is an integral part of this. So, our government and energy companies need to now be setting the most ambitious targets possible to boost renewable energy's share in our overall energy mix.

Bangladesh can also lead the way in terms of the actual clothing we produce. For every major fashion retailer, recycling and circularity are the main goals right now. How can we support our customers on this journey? For this, Bangladesh needs to invest in textile recycling. Why can't we aim to become a global hub for new textile recycling technologies? Clothing is our lifeblood. And since we already have so much manufacturing infrastructure in place, why not take advantage of it to move more heavily into textile recycling—before a competitor does?

Quality and durability will likely become key issues in clothing production moving forward. There is an argument that our industry should focus on quality, not quantity, if it wishes to improve its environmental footprint. We have heavily focused on cotton clothing throughout the history of our garment industry, but perhaps we need to broaden the amount of other fibres used in clothing, including viscose, wool and other fibres.

Finally, the other side of sustainability is a social one. As well as becoming a leader on environmental issues, Bangladesh can show the world that working in a garment factory does not have to be a job with poverty pay, carried out in poor conditions with no career prospects. We should be aspiring to do much more for garment workers. There is still a huge room for improvement in garment pay and conditions, and supply chain costs would not have to increase hugely to accommodate these gains.

We've spent two decades talking about garment worker pay, yet progress has been painfully slow. Bangladesh can lead the way here, with factory owners, unions, rights groups and workers implementing a process of continuous improvement.

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