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A pandemic of ill-conceived projects

Establish accountability to tackle habitual time-cost overruns

BANGLADESH clearly has an execution problem when it comes to projects. Few public projects finish on time, and fewer still without their costs escalating to ridiculous heights. This is perhaps the biggest barrier to tax-paying citizens getting their money's worth from the avalanche of projects launched round the year. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), lack of good governance in implementation is undermining the efficiency of public infrastructure projects (PIPs) despite the huge investments being made.

Having commented on this issue just the other day, we're pained to know of another instance in which a PIP on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway – which was supposed to finish by June 2015 at a cost of Tk 239.7 crore – was completed five years after the original deadline, and at a cost of Tk 353.36 crore. That's 250 percent extra time and 47.36 percent additional funding, according to an official estimate. It happened because the project was undertaken without any feasibility study – a fundamental requirement – thus necessitating a series of revisions in later stages. This is, unfortunately, the story of many other projects as well, and it's stupefying that those at the planning ministry would still greenlight them.

The absence of a feasibility study is just as bad as the presence of a weak feasibility study, both of which are fairly common. It's the first and perhaps most consequential factor in poorly planned undertakings. Other problems identified by the CPD include coordination failure, delays in land acquisition, frequent changes of project directors, etc. Mismanagement is the running theme behind all such obstacles. Delays can also trigger a chain of costly disruptions including – as it happened in a project by the Anti-Corruption Commission – expiry of licensed material. The material in question, as reported by a daily, is software needed for a planned digital forensic lab. And it is set to expire even before the project can take off!

This is a sad commentary on how even projects meant to tackle corruption are instead drowning in it. The same thing happened to another project that was meant to reduce corruption in government aid programmes. The upcoming National Household Database, we're told, will be "unusable", even after being eight years in the making and having spent Tk 727 crore to make it. Is there no institutional mechanism to check such systemic problems and consequent disappointments?

We urge the government to establish accountability to ensure that all of its projects are planned and executed properly. Ill-conceived projects not just drain us financially, but also potentially cancel out their benefits. This has been going on for so long, and it is the public who have had to pay for it. We must stop this culture.

Digitalisation of public services is paying off

But major bottlenecks remain, depriving people of full benefits

WE'RE glad to learn that the government's digitalisation drive is bringing desired benefits to the people, as has been revealed in a study by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED). It is indeed a leap forward that digitalisation of 66 percent of services offered by six ministries/divisions is saving both time and money of the service-seekers. Reportedly, as many as 161 services out of the 244 provided by 28 agencies under those six ministries and divisions have been digitalised. Among the relevant ministries are education, land, health and family welfare, and primary and mass education.

A further look at the IMED report, based on interviews with service recipients and providers, reveals that 92 percent of recipients saved extra cost and 96 percent saved extra time because of digitalisation. Some 70 percent said they had faced no "hassle" which one would while those offices were run manually. While this is not to say that problems no longer exist in accessing those services – and one maybe inclined to take official figures with a pinch of salt – it nevertheless marks a significant improvement from when no file moved without money, and service-seekers had to go through barriers at every step of the way.

One may recall the massive sufferings caused when people visited the land offices for services concerning sale or purchase of land. People often had a nightmarish experience while seeking land mutation and other papers, spending large sums of money and waiting for weeks/months for desired documents. But now that process has become easier after the government digitalised 10 services under five departments of the land ministry. People can now apply for e-mutation of land and receive the document in seven days, whereas, in the past, it would take at least 28 days. So far, more than three crore people got land registration by paying the land development tax online, without spending additional money.

But significant challenges still exist, even in sectors that went fully online or are still pursuing an online-offline model, thanks to lack of digital literacy, slow and often complicated bureaucratic procedures, and the intervention of middlemen in cahoots with corrupt officials, who have found a way to exploit the online system. Also, some important sectors are still limping under the manual system. The reluctance of the past and present bosses of these agencies and departments to derive the benefits of digitalisation should be addressed. In a technology-driven world, digitalisation is a must, and the authorities must fully embrace it sooner than later.

Why aren't we looking at climate-based solutions to address flooding?

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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THIS year's floods and the misery they continue to cause have made us realise that nature still exercises a very powerful influence on our economy and the lives of poor people. While the elite and the political leaders ensconced in Dhaka city celebrate our middle-income status and the opening of the landmark Padma Bridge, for millions affected by the floods in the Sylhet region, the current situation and the future are grim.

The London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) conducted a survey in Bangladesh on the cost of flooding for the poor families affected. Of the 1,320 flooded households they interviewed, nearly a third had incurred debts trying to raise the floors of their homes, others had invested in better protection for their livestock, in addition to taking other measures to reduce the effects of the flood on their lives.

Floods are not new to Bangladesh. Statistics show that in only the last seven years, the country's northern and northeastern regions have witnessed five major floods. Prof Saiful Islam of the Institute of Water and Flood Management (IWFM) at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) has concluded from 35 years of flooding data that "rains are getting more unpredictable and many rivers are rising above dangerous levels more frequently than before."

A global dataset from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction reveals that the country will experience severe floods periodically due to "nonlinear geomorphological and hydrometeorological trends, unplanned land use practices including urban sprawl, deforestation and significant population growth."

During my studies at Dhaka University, Prof Swapan Adnan's course on "The Economy of Bangladesh" presented an analytical perspective on the range of flood control measures on the table, and the dilemma that the Pakistani rulers faced as they tried to address the cost of various proposed structural interventions. One lesson we all took away from his class was a keen awareness of the problem we faced, interlaced with the hope that the new leaders of Bangladesh would now be able to tackle this recurrent natural disaster and develop a set of actions that will be consistent with people's wishes, as opposed to the top-down decision-making mechanism during the Pakistan era.

That was almost 50 years ago. It appears that not much has changed since then, and one could even characterise the current state of affairs as policy paralysis. "The siltation of riverbeds caused by deforestation and solid waste dumping has already reduced the water-carrying capacity of the rivers in Bangladesh," Ashiq Iqbal, a researcher at the IWFM, recently told Al Jazeera. While every year there are demands to improve the response to such disasters, limited resources make the process of improving civic infrastructure or dredging rivers a challenge for Bangladesh. While megaprojects such as roads, bridges, power plants, and tunnels are swallowing down our development funds, many vocal activists are blaming everything on climate change and the inaction of rich countries.

In what is called the worst flooding event in Bangladesh in over a century, people in the Sylhet region are barely surviving day to day.

PHOTO: **SHEIKH NASIR**

In the meantime, there is an intense discussion taking place on social media, as well as among experts, about whether the recent obsession with road construction, particularly in the flood-prone haor areas, has led to an increase in the frequency and intensity of flash floods. A case in point is the 29.73km Itna-Mithamoin-Austagram road, popularly known as the "Haor Road," which has undoubtedly facilitated direct road connectivity between the haor region and other parts of the country, including Dhaka, Sylhet, and Chattogram. But the Haor Road might also have contributed to the floods in seven districts. Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, professor of civil engineering at Buet, said the highway had been a bad idea from the beginning. "By constructing the Itna-Mithamoin-Austagram road, we have caused huge damage to the fragile and special ecosystem of the haor region. We learnt by paying a heavy price," he said in an interview.

Now, what are some of the solutions going forward? Floods can be destructive to humans and the natural environment, but they also help drive biodiversity and are essential to the functioning of many ecosystems. In this context, dredging has been proven as an effective process to control the deposited sediment to prevent flooding and make a pathway for the main channel flow. It also allows us to further solve engineering problems related to sedimentation and erosion in rivers, estuaries, and coastal seas.

Nature-based solutions (NbS) can address climate and natural hazards at the same time as contributing to other sustainable development goals. They can reduce vulnerability to climate change and natural hazards by reducing exposure to impacts (e.g. forests protecting against floods), reducing sensitivity to impacts (e.g. by diversifying livelihood options) and increasing the capacity to adapt to change (e.g. by empowering communities and individuals).

Climate change scenarios using hydrological and hydrodynamic models show that the incremental cost for Bangladesh to climate-proof roads and railways, river embankments protecting agricultural lands, and drainage systems and erosion control measures for major population centres are less than USD 3,000 million and USD 54 million in annual recurrent costs.

Sound public policies, prudent planning, and institutions with a majority of human resources are required to ensure that such capital-intensive measures are implemented within budget. In terms of mitigation, infrastructures and soft solutions are both essential. Physical measures need to be complemented by education, job training, and other "soft" investments designed to reduce reliance on resources and assets whose value may be eroded by climate change. Rather, measures should offer a sustainable path that accommodates their effect in the least disruptive way without placing a disproportionate burden on the poor and vulnerable.

And on a broader scale, Bangladesh should work with other countries in the region to prepare for a world with more intense and disruptive flooding events. The challenge will only get harder as the world gets hotter.

A case for making jobseekers' info open data

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WHEN I informed my PhD supervisor that I wanted to work on a topic related to Bangladesh, he asked me a small but very important question: "Do you have data?" I believe Bangladeshi academicians, researchers, and public policymakers always come across this question.

There is a huge need for data in every aspect of human life today – from personal life to business, social, scientific, economic, and public policy and decision-making processes. Statistical organisations in different countries, especially the developed ones, collect data for the economy, health, education, labour force, and other social indicators by using different survey methods. This data helps formulate, evaluate, review, and research various public policies. One of the most innovative inventions in the 21st century is artificial intelligence, and data is one of the foundations of this ingenious invention.

Not only Bangladesh, but many developing countries have insufficient data availability because of the lack of infrastructure, investment, and human resources in this area. However, in today's age of digitalisation, data collection, storage, and use have become much easier.

Many developing countries have insufficient data availability due to lack of infrastructure, investment, and human resources. However, in today's age of digitalisation, data collection, storage, and use have become much easier.

In Bangladesh, jobseekers now apply for employment mostly online. This process has made the previous manual information management easier for the recruiting agencies and has helped a lot in speeding up the process for those organisations. However, so far, this data is only used for the needs of the respective organisations. At most, these organisations disclose such information as per the requirement of the higher authorities of the government. In some cases, the authority concerned provides information to an individual under the purview of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

But there are scopes for using this data more widely for the country's needs.

It may be noted here that the Bangladesh government adopted the Open Government Data Strategy in 2016 in its efforts to promote open data. It aims to make public service available efficiently and transparently, promote innovation and research, and improve Bangladesh's national economy. With a view of "Data for All," the government portal was launched in 2016 to provide a common platform for publicly available datasets. Still, it requires all-out support from the public sector organisations.

In the present context of Bangladesh, a few public-sector recruiting agencies can promote the government's open data agenda. In particular, the Bangladesh Public Service Commission, the Bankers' Selection Committee of Bangladesh Bank, and the Directorate of Primary Education can perform this task very well as these organisations collect and preserve massive amounts of information about jobseekers.

Every year, millions of jobseekers apply to these government institutions. For example, more than 350,000 people applied for the 44th BCS examination, and more than 1.3 million candidates submitted online applications in the last circular for the post of assistant teacher of government primary schools. Job applications are usually accompanied by personal, educational, family, and other relevant information. This information can create datasets that can be used in many social and economic analyses and research, including education, unemployment, poverty, and inequality, and help policymakers formulate better policies that are more realistic and people-friendly.

However, there are plausible concerns about open data. The risk of the violation of privacy and potential misinterpretation of data due to poor documentation are among the top concerns. In that case, appropriate legal measures and sound technical support can make the data anonymous and ensure meticulous, accurate documentation.

It is worth mentioning a recent bold step taken by the Public Service Commission of Tamil Nadu in India. The commission has adopted an open data and proactive disclosable information policy, designing it in such a manner that does not allow a data user to identify any job applicant. The data release only includes the details of everyone who applied, their test scores, and the selection outcomes.

Public sector recruiting agencies' willingness and efforts to publish jobseekers' anonymous data can create huge datasets, which can be used for analysis and research, and effectively determine the cause of the nation's many socioeconomic issues – and help find ways to solve them.