

The Daily Star

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Hold project managers accountable

Will the PM's directive on having environment-friendly projects work?

In recent months, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has given a number of important directives to government officials, such as urging them to practise austerity in relation to foreign travels using taxpayers' money, refrain from taking up less urgent projects, abandon the culture of project revisions, etc. Unfortunately, government officials down the chain of command seem to have acquired a habit of nodding their heads to her directives, only to brush them off when it comes to implementation. In her latest directive on Tuesday, the PM asked officials to ensure that projects taken up by the government are environment-friendly, and to avoid repeated revisions of ongoing projects. This is a laudable instruction. But will it be properly followed through? We remain doubtful.

Even though we have seen this government previously react adamantly about sacrificing the environment at the altar of development – much to the chagrin of environmentalists and the public who have suffered as a result – the PM seems to have softened a little on that stance while giving this directive. In the past, we've often seen projects that were not only detrimental to the environment, but also a contravention of promises made by our leaders on the international stage. The Rampal Power Plant, situated 14 kilometres north of the Sundarbans, which is a Unesco World Heritage Site, is a perfect example of this. Experts had warned numerous times that the plant would endanger the wellbeing of the Sundarbans, a plethora of plant and animal species that live there, as well as human beings who rely on the mangrove forest to protect them from cyclones. Despite repeated calls from experts to relocate the power plant elsewhere, the government went ahead with it anyway. Only the future can tell us what price Bangladesh will have to pay as a result of that decision.

When it comes to time and cost overruns caused by project revisions, Bangladesh is already paying the price, however. Many of the current economic challenges could, in fact, have been mitigated had the government fixed this revision problem. Instead, it has repeatedly blamed black swan events like the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, etc. for repeated revisions. But the fact remains that many of the projects still being revised today were taken up years before any of these events/issues surfaced. It's clear that government officials are still trying to pull the wool over people's eyes by coming up with excuses, rather than fixing the real underlying problems plaguing our development.

The most important among them is the lack of accountability in public institutions. Officials have rarely, if ever, been held accountable for their mismanagement, corruption, and ineptitude that have led to frequent project revisions or projects taken up without a thought about their environmental impacts. So, unless the government brings its offices and officials under a strict accountability mechanism, whereby violations of rules and guidelines are addressed properly, no amount of rhetoric can fix the problems that the PM, and the public in general, are concerned about.

Multimedia classroom in name only

Follow-up of public projects is key to their effectiveness

It was in the late 2010s that the government, under its Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP), began providing digital learning devices (mainly laptops, projectors, modems, and SIMs) to government primary schools across the country. This was part of an effort to digitalise primary education and make modern technology more accessible to children. However, by 2022, it seems that multimedia classrooms remain a distant reality in many cases. As a *Prothom Alo* investigation of 58 primary schools in Thakurgaon shows, 58.2 percent of schools have laptops that do not work, 15.5 percent received digital devices but no proper training, 31.03 percent have never used projectors to conduct lessons, and 8.95 percent received laptops that did not work from the get-go.

Moreover, of the 409 schools in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila, at least 27 lack either a laptop or a projector, thus making it impossible for them to conduct multimedia lessons. And while some schools did receive all the necessary devices, no teachers were trained to operate these effectively. This is quite concerning.

There can be no denying that multimedia classrooms help make lessons more interesting and captivating for young students. Only one primary school (of the aforementioned 58 in Thakurgaon) was found to conduct at least one multimedia lesson every day, and its head teacher reported the effectiveness of such lessons for children in terms of information retention. But such projects, despite their potential to change the life of target beneficiaries, are often turned futile by the inefficiency and mismanagement of those involved. Unfortunately, this is nothing new when it comes to government projects, regardless of their scale or sector.

Even in late 2019, the same daily reported a similar scenario in Badarganj upazila of Rangpur, where digital devices provided to 25 of the 26 schools investigated were found to be collecting dust. In many cases, due to lack of security, laptops are kept in the homes of teachers or other staff members, often for months on end, without ever being used for their intended purpose.

All this points to a recurring issue in the implementation of government projects: lack of follow-up. Why didn't PEDP officials ensure that at least one teacher from each school was being trained to operate the digital devices allocated to them? Why didn't the schools lacking trained teachers reach out to their respective district primary education office for assistance? Why were faulty devices provided in the first place? And why was a separate budget not given to schools for the repair and maintenance of these devices?

We urge the authorities to take this issue seriously and follow up on the performance of PEDP-linked primary schools across the country to make the programme a success. If done right, digitalisation of our education sector can hugely benefit young students, especially in terms of preparing them to be more comfortable using technology in the long term.

How to make roads more durable in Bangladesh



Dr Nawshad Ahmed, a former UN official, is an economist and urban planner.

NAWSHAD AHMED

Road construction, reconstruction and repair in Bangladesh call for some serious attention due to the high volume of investment made in roadworks every year. Detailed and careful designing of the roads and maintaining the quality of construction are two critical aspects in this respect. The paved road network in Bangladesh has increased dramatically from 600 km in 1947, to 3,600 km in 1971, to the current figure of 375,000 km.

In the 2022-2023 Annual Development Programme (ADP) budget, transportation and communications sector has been allocated 28.7 percent, from where Tk 31,296 crore has been allotted in favour of the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD), which is 12.7 percent of the total ADP budget. This year's allocation is 11.6 percent higher than last year's – in the 2021-22 fiscal year, this sector had received a Tk 28,042-crore allocation. Besides the RTHD, another prominent government entity that builds and maintains our roads and bridges is the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED). In FY2022-23, the Local Government Division (LGD) has been allocated Tk 35,842 crore from the ADP budget, from which a substantial amount is being spent on road construction, reconstruction, and maintenance through the LGED and by 13 city corporations and 329 municipalities.

Given that the government invests such a huge amount of public resources in the road sector every year, this investment is likely to continue to grow in the future as the demand for new roads and expansion of the existing roads is bound to increase every year. The authorities, therefore, need to assess the design standards being used in road construction in the country. In this respect, most donor-funded projects and locally funded major projects take special efforts to undertake proper designing of the roads by using road design standards recommended by the Planning Commission, the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) or the LGED. The standards vary according to the type of road considered, but if they are properly followed at the design stage and then the design is strictly followed



Following design, construction, and maintenance standards diligently will make our roads durable.

PHOTO: COURTESY

during the construction, the durability of our roads should definitely increase.

As reported by this daily in June this year, in a recent RHD survey, around 2,100 km of roads under its jurisdiction are in "poor, bad or very bad" condition. There are about 22,428 km of national and regional highways and district roads under the RHD jurisdiction. One of the major cause of deterioration of the roads is inadequate operation and maintenance. Many of our roads were built a long time ago, and since then, traffic volumes and use of public highways have grown many-fold, but the concomitant efforts and investment have not been made to keep them in a good condition. Many of these roads have undergone numerous ad hoc repair work to fix surface defects, such as potholes. But the life of some of these roads have come to an end, and thus require removal and replacement of the road surface and their foundations.

In the existing roads in the country,

constructed keeping the expected weight of vehicles and volume of traffic in mind. The highways should thus be designed to withstand the loads and built with several layers as per design standards. Where required, special care should be taken to build hard shoulders and provide drains along the roads for smooth water flow during the rainy season.

A strong supervision and monitoring system should be able to ensure that the road design is actually followed during the implementation phase. Even if there is a good design, it may not necessarily be strictly followed if supervision during construction is not enforced. A third party monitoring system to ensure quality work has proven useful for many large infrastructure projects in Bangladesh; doing the same, therefore, should be adopted as a standard practice for all projects – including roadworks – above a particular threshold of investment that the government can decide.

alternative to bitumen and ordinary bricks. While the initial investment with uni-blocks is higher, it is much more durable and the maintenance cost is lower than bitumen roads. Also, in many countries, nanotechnology is used in road construction, which makes the roads very strong and water-resistant and require minimal use of chemicals and fossil fuel. Reinforced cement concrete (RCC) is also recommended in areas where the problem of water-logging is common. The strength gained in cement concrete with the use of nanomaterials can lead to high levels of durability of the roads.

The government should learn from international experience and popularise this technology in Bangladesh. They should also encourage more research in road construction and maintenance technology with the objective of reducing construction cost of our roads, which is high.

WORLD EXPO 2030

Let Rome be the gateway to shared solutions to global problems



Romeo Orlandi is special ambassador for Asia at Bid Committee Expo 2030 Rome.

ROMEO ORLANDI

A stroll through downtown Rome is enough to understand why it earned the title of "Eternal City," and how well deserved the title is. The many, deep layers of its history coexist folded together and overlapping in a harmonious whole. This historical stratification is invaluable for scholars, unique for the city's proud inhabitants, and fascinating for tourists from all over the world. For more than 2,000 years, the capital of Italy has offered an example of awe-inspiring continuity, thriving splendour, and a profound and diverse artistic richness. Now this city has offered its candidacy to host the World Expo 2030.

Rome did not base its proposal just on the potential for strong mediatic impact – nor did it intend to capture global attention merely by invoking its universal, historic fame. Instead, the city opted for a distinctive, succinct programmatic slogan that implies a clearly defined and comprehensive commitment, "People and territories: urban regeneration, inclusion, and innovation." This formula addresses a challenge that is common to all countries and relevant to the international community. It reflects the recommendations of the United

Nations and of the most important multilateral forums today. Indeed, the themes selected by Rome concern the whole planet, because they point to unavoidable issues that will need to be addressed worldwide. The programme's implementation is many-fold as it includes development, diversity, sustainability, mobility, and digital connectivity. Rome intends to address these issues, while at the same time stimulating dialogue, developing consensual solutions, and pointing to a collective path.

The city of Rome is the metropolis with the highest number of green spaces in Europe. Its urban parks, historic villas, gardens, and nature reserves provide a precious balance – an integration of its citizens with nature that is centuries old. Furthermore, with its mild climate, it is the largest agricultural municipality in Europe. Intensive cultivation of edible crops within the city limits generates both employment and income. The resources used – water, raw materials, fertilisers – traditionally change only with the seasons' cycle, in keeping with an ancient tradition of mutual respect and shared prosperity. Here, too, the legacy of the past is not

a burden but rather an inspiration, a springboard rather than a spectacle.

Rome has valued diversity since ancient times. Diversity has increased over time, becoming a fertile path to growth and cultural enrichment. Rome – in the centre of the Mediterranean, at the crossroads of three continents – has attracted ideas and talents that have found multiple ways to express themselves. The extraordinary conglomeration of art and civilisation we can find in Rome would not have been possible without a culture of sharing and welcoming. Throughout the districts of the city, and in the streets crowded with foreign visitors, the international and inclusive character of the capital is still clear today. The result is a unique blend of history, nature and people reflected in the quality of life, in the constantly renewed beauty, in the harmony of architecture and landscape.

The site chosen for the World Expo 2030 in Rome (if the city is given the task by the Bureau International des Expositions via vote next year in Paris) is located in a large, fully equipped area on the outskirts of the city, adjacent to one of its university campuses. This site truly represents the excellence of the scientific community's contribution to Rome's candidacy. The event is expected to take place in full compliance of the most stringent sustainability standards, with zero carbon dioxide emissions, reuse of materials, and respect for the life cycle of water, air, and energy.

The Roma 2030 logo is a stylised arch, which changes colour and gives

life to infinite combinations. It is an NFT (non-fungible token) – in other words, a non-reproducible work of art. It connotes the solidity and elegance of ancient Roman monuments while embodying the reality of the digital present. It powerfully communicates its originating concept: the arch is an open door for new and different inputs and influences. It also suggests a joint path and a range of opportunities such as the co-creation of various national pavilions. Rome expects that, by the end of 2030, as many as 30 million visitors will have passed through that arch in order to admire the exhibition pavilions of 150 countries.

I have already had the chance to visit Dhaka before, and I am impressed with its exceptional development and fast urban regeneration during the last decade, with several infrastructural and residential projects in line with the Sustainable Development Goal No 11 of UN Agenda 2030.

Urban development with all related challenges, which a megacity like Dhaka is also facing due to climate change, migration flow and the increasing need for inclusion, will be duly discussed during Expo 2030 Rome in order to find new solutions, ideas and strategies together.

We do believe that Expo 2030 Rome will be the ideal occasion to further strengthen the partnership between our two countries – also considering the hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi citizens living in Italy and actively contributing to both our economies – and to share traditions, ideas and resources for a common, better future.