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FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

We must check relentless price increase

Lack of action to bring down prices of food is deeply concerning

If 2022 was a year of suffering for the poor and people of fixed income – with the cost of living reaching absurd heights – 2023 in its second month already promises to surpass that sad milestone. In January, within the space of just three weeks, the government twice increased the prices of electricity. In the first week of February, the price of LPG has seen steep increase, while an earlier increase in gas prices for industries, power plants and commercial establishments has come into effect. The relentless increase in fuel, gas and electricity prices – and therefore in transport and production costs – already threatens to take essentials further beyond the reach of consumers.

Unfortunately, beyond excuses and sentimental claptrap, our leaders have failed to offer a way to reduce suffering. It's almost as if the poor are expected to somehow make their needs disappear using their magic wand, uncritically accepting the government decision to withdraw subsidies from the energy sector at a time when they are at their most vulnerable. A report by this daily shows us the level of suffering this has caused. A 60-year-old security guard tells us that his family of nine has to borrow to meet basic requirements, despite their collective income of Tk 40,000. A bank clerk says he has cut down on his intake of bread at breakfast against his doctor's advice – with the prices of flour, along with rice and soyabean oil, soaring by up to around 20 percent in a year.

The government's response to this hike-fest has been minimal at best, and non-existent at worst. Even the prices of food items that remain usually low in winter, like potatoes and vegetables, have not come down, suggesting the collapse of any market regulation mechanism that it has. Many have also complained that, for essentials like LPG, they are being charged more than the prices set officially. And it is not just the people of the low-income groups, but middle-income people are also suffering greatly, as the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) revealed last month. Analysing the pricing trend in Dhaka, the CAB said that the average annual inflation rate in 2022 was 11.08 percent.

Clearly, we have reached a point where drastic action is needed to reverse this trend and minimise people's suffering. We agree with the PM that gas and electricity cannot be subsidised indefinitely, but this is neither the time to fully abandon subsidies nor should the IMF's loan conditions be the only driver behind any reform measures being planned. People's long-term and immediate interests should both be considered while undertaking these reforms, and proper execution is a must to ensure maximum benefits. People's immediate interests dictate that the absurdly high prices of essentials, caused by the energy price hikes and lack of market regulation, should be urgently reduced.

Moreover, the government should consider expanding its social security programmes to reduce the impact of high inflation on the poor, and also take steps to raise the income level of ordinary citizens, including the middle-class. The government must prove its sincerity to understand and address their problems.

Today's readers, tomorrow's leaders

Govt must take better care of public and private libraries

Libraries play a crucial role in fostering knowledge for people of all ages and backgrounds. Good libraries act as learning hubs, providing not just books but also various learning opportunities. Libraries are also important because they provide a secure and inclusive environment for people to widen their knowledge, skills, and viewpoints. Investing in libraries is thus an investment in our society's future.

Sadly, we see the exact opposite of this happening at the state-run National Book Centre, which is responsible for all the private libraries in the country, giving grants to more than 1,200 of them presently, according to a report by *Prothom Alo*. However, the office of the centre is located in a traffic jam-prone area (Gulistan) and is hardly noticeable from outside, making it difficult to access it. The activities of the centre are also questionable. Currently, it provides so little annual funding that affiliated libraries can only cover one to two months' expenses with that. The centre has the added challenge of ensuring that the libraries that are getting donations are using them properly, which it often fails to do. Therefore, it is crucial that it maintains the standards of these libraries so that they can encourage and enlighten readers. Readers should be able to access a diverse range of books from these libraries, and their overall environment should be user-friendly.

We may have already entered the era of the fourth industrial revolution where building a knowledge-based society is key. The only way to do that is to have good libraries that are easily accessible to the public. But many libraries in the country are underfunded, understaffed, and frankly, not aligned with the goals of a library. The poor condition of many public and private libraries – which often do not have a wide range of books, and have rather become a hub only for BCS candidates – suggests that the authorities are unwilling to support the drive for the enlightenment of the people, especially the younger generation.

Enlightenment requires that people are able to read profusely, critically engage with diverse topics, form their own opinion, and freely share it with their peers. The plight of our libraries, however, represents a shrinking of the space needed for that kind of intellectual engagement in the country. Such engagements are vital for a healthy democracy and the future of our nation. Instead of encouraging it, the authorities seem to be increasingly allowing barriers to this exercise – through allowing a decline in the quality of libraries, through restricting critical publications, through punishing dissenting voices with the help of various draconian laws, etc.

We, therefore, urge the government to stop this misguided strategy, and encourage free-flowing intellectual interactions for the sake of our nation. And it must improve the condition of all existing public and private libraries, and thereby make knowledge accessible to all.

For a better fiscal space, we need efficient tax system

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The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has finally approved a USD 4.7 billion loan for Bangladesh, accepting the country's request for funds in the face of its declining foreign exchange reserves. As a conditionality of this loan, the Bangladesh government must undertake several reform measures in many areas, one of which is improving the country's fiscal space.

Irrespective of IMF conditionality, this is an area on which the government should work more, since our fiscal space is shrinking with the increasing priorities against a low tax-to-GDP ratio. In FY 2021-22, our tax-GDP ratio was only about 7.5 percent. In a country of more than 165 million people (Census 2022), only eight million people have a tax identification number (TIN), of whom only 2.8 million submit tax returns. This indicates low tax net and high tax evasion. As the size of the economy and per capita income is increasing, the disposable income of some sections of the population is also increasing. But this change is not reflected in the country's revenue generation.

Improving our revenue generation will require several measures, both technical and non-technical. As far as technical measures are concerned, using information technology will help establish a smooth and easy tax collection procedure. As a result, it will also increase tax compliances, and governance of the tax system will improve. Technology can be used to also track people's income and expenditure. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) will be able to work efficiently and effectively in a modern automated system.

The NBR employed a few reform measures in the past, which saw some success. But there is a lot to be done still. Measures such as the upgradation of the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA), consolidation and integration of Integrated Budget and Accounting System (iBAS++), electronic return filing, electronic tax deducted at source (e-TDS), automated customs risk management, and introduction of authorised economic operator system were proposed a few years ago. The government needs to expedite such reform measures for better and faster outcomes.

The non-technical efforts are no less important for increased tax collection. Many people don't want to come under the tax system for several reasons. There is a lack of awareness on the tax mechanism. People also fear hassle and harassment if they come under the tax radar. There is a general idea that those who are regular taxpayers are targeted for more and more taxes, instead of the powerful tax evaders. People also feel unhappy about the services they receive from the government even after paying taxes, with complaints of having to pay bribes for said services.

Hopefully, with higher tax collection, the overall domestic resource mobilisation situation will improve. Of course, this depends on several factors. The first and foremost is a sound public spending management; for economic development, public expenditure must be managed efficiently and prudently. In recent years, Bangladesh has seen large investment in infrastructure. But those investments are not always free of corruption. So, the dual challenge for our policymakers is to generate adequate domestic resources and utilise them in a manner that contributes to our economic growth and enhances welfare in the most optimised way.

How the government spends the taxed income is also very important. Taxpayers want to see proper utilisation of their hard-earned money. They want to know the quality of public expenditures and whether they are creating enough jobs and reducing poverty. Taxpayers want services from public representatives and officials when they seek support from them. People also see how the other eligible taxpayers are behaving. If their friends and acquaintances get away with paying little to no tax, they would not be encouraged to pay taxes. Without addressing these issues, technical solutions will not be effective.

Globally, domestic resource mobilisation has become critical in the context of the declined flow of foreign aid to developing countries. Reliance on external resources is an unsustainable development path, while domestic resource mobilisation is key to self-sustaining development. There is a predictability of resource flow through domestic resource mobilisation, which helps a government with short- and medium-term fiscal planning. On the other hand, the flow of external aid is volatile and unpredictable. This puts an aid-recipient country in trouble in case of budget management.

Moreover, the availability of adequate domestic resources helps a government to prioritise its national expenditures according to its commitments. It has a flexibility to devote resources as per its national priority, as opposed to aid conditionalities. Third, people contribute to domestic resource mobilisation through paying taxes from their income. This creates a sense of participation in the country's development process. Therefore, people have the right to play watchdog and ask about the proper utilisation of their money, and create pressure on public representatives for accountability and transparency of resource utilisation.

Over the past decades, some initiatives were taken by the government of the day to enhance resource mobilisation through expansion of tax net and realisation of taxes. But the outcomes have been less than satisfactory, as the initiatives were taken on a piecemeal basis. Also, several of such measures were driven by international organisations, including the IMF, and were not homegrown. Imposition of policies by external agencies and donors as a precondition for support is bound to fail if those are not owned by the implementing country. How Bangladesh's fiscal framework is strengthened following the acceptance of the IMF loan conditionalities this time is to be observed in the coming days.

VISUAL: **TEENI AND TUNI**

What threats does ChatGPT pose to our academia?

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US-based artificial intelligence company OpenAI's Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3 (GPT-3) technology, including ChatGPT, has brought about a revolution in the field of AI with its advanced language processing capabilities. Its widespread availability and accessibility bring both benefits and risks. There is potential of misuse, and educators and researchers must be aware of the risks associated with this technology.

One of the ways in which students may misuse the GPT-3 technology is by using it to complete their assignments without actually understanding the concepts or the problem-solving strategies involved. This can lead to a dependency on technology and a lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Developing these skills is essential for success in both education and professional career, and their absence can have a significant impact on a student's future prospects.

Another way in which students may abuse GPT-3 is by using it to plagiarise their assignments. Its advanced language processing capabilities make it possible to generate high-quality text, which can be tempting for students to copy and paste into their own work. This undermines the educational process and devalues the efforts of those students who complete their work independently. Plagiarism is a serious offence and can result in academic dishonesty charges, which can have a lasting impact on a student's future.

Researchers may misuse the GPT-3 technology by using it to manipulate or fabricate data, which can compromise the integrity of research and lead to significant consequences for both the individual researcher and the wider scientific and research community.

In addition, GPT-3 has the potential to perpetuate biases and harmful stereotypes. The technology is trained on a large amount of text data, which includes both explicit and implicit biases. If these biases are not addressed, they can be amplified and perpetuated through the technology's outputs. This can have serious consequences for marginalised groups and undermine the efforts to address societal inequalities.

How do we minimise the risks and maximise the benefits, then?

Our education system must integrate ethical and responsible use of these tools into the curricula, monitoring its impact on student learning and development. Strict ethical standards for research must be adopted, addressing biases and harmful outcomes in the technology's outputs, addressing the potential for malicious use and defining ways to prevent such.

Schools, colleges and universities must integrate new technology usage ethics into their curricula, and online assignment and exam systems, violations of which should be dealt with justified penalties. It's important to educate both the teachers and students about the danger of plagiarism and the consequences of academic dishonesty. Teachers need to provide students with new guidelines and scopes on AI-based text creation, critically evaluate them and avoid conflicts with independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

To restrict the misuse of GPT-3 technology by researchers, strict ethical standards and guidelines have to be installed to ensure adherence to ethical data collection and analysis, as well as prohibition of data manipulation or fabrication. Researchers should also be required to engage in even deeper and heavily engaged peer review and collaboration to ensure that their work is transparent, accurate, and reliable.

On the flip side, language models such as ChatGPT can help improve students' writing and communication skills, as long as it is used as a tool to support learning, rather than a replacement for it.

Bangladeshi school exams are mostly in written form, but there is a growing demand for introducing oral exams and verifying presentation skills comprehensively. In Bangladeshi universities, plagiarism is still a massive problem. In this circumstance, preventing plagiarism through an AI tool requires new, improved measures.

First, the University Grants Commission (UGC) as well as all the education boards must make the use of plagiarism software mandatory. Second, there must be new measures to prevent copy-pasting texts from AI-generated content. Thesis and assignments should be defended through new mechanisms to evaluate the students' understanding of the subjects as well as their critical-thinking capabilities.

Monitoring ChatGPT's influence on learning and research, and addressing research biases and other harmful aspects of the technology's outputs should be taken as a serious concern. The curricula has to be orchestrated and developed in a new way in the age of open source AI.

The UGC can create a dedicated national consortium body with subject matter experts from all fields of education Bangladeshi educational institutions. This body can ensure that none of the undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate research topics is partially duplicated and mirrored at the national level. The body can also monitor and nurture the quality of Bangladeshi thesis, journals and research papers.

Bangladeshi researchers are scoring extremely poor in the Scopus peer review database. According to the world's largest peer-reviewed database, in 2021, Bangladeshi researchers published only 11,477 papers against 222,849 from India and 35,663 from Pakistan. Bangladesh scores very poorly in other databases too. In the 2020 Scimago review database, Bangladesh had not a single Q1 and Q2 research paper.

In the Global Knowledge Index 2021, Bangladesh ranked 120th out of 154 countries. Bangladesh ranks 102nd among the 132 economies featured in the Global Innovation Index 2022. In the age of open source AI like ChatGPT, the research and innovation qualities of Bangladeshi students and researchers may get worse, so proper steps and actions must be taken now.

Disclaimer: This writer used chatGPT to prepare this piece.