

Capacity payments eating up subsidies

Govt must rethink its energy policy

At a time when the public is having to bear the brunt of soaring prices of electricity and gas, with both power sources experiencing acute shortages in recent months, it is shocking that as much as one-fourth of the government's subsidy allocations go to the power sector, that too mostly for capacity payments to private power plants. The present budget, moreover, shows that the government has no intention of changing this burdensome situation. It reflects a flawed policy that experts have been criticising for long, to little effect so far.

At a recent event, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has highlighted the heavy burden placed on the Power Development Board (PDB) as a result of these capacity payments, which are part of maintaining a privately-owned plant regardless of whether it is supplying electricity or not. The PDB incurred an operating loss of Tk 27,477 crore in FY2021-2022. In FY2017-2018, it was Tk 6,200. The massive increase in losses was largely due to surging capacity payments, prompting an expert to liken the PDB to "a white elephant", with the cost ultimately borne by the taxpayers.

At a time when the fuel crisis has emerged as the biggest challenge for Bangladesh, it is mindboggling that we continue to be saddled with such burdens. As CPD has pointed out, increasing the electricity generation capacity without increasing the distribution capacity has resulted in as much as 50 percent of the capacity left unused. Meanwhile, the country has been facing gruelling hours of load shedding in the hottest months, with factories and other business establishments either sitting idle or having to use expensive generators. The subsidy management is being done by placing a huge burden on the consumers who are already struggling to cope with the soaring prices of electricity and gas as well as food.

When the prices of fuel and gas go up, the cost of everything else goes up too, placing extreme financial pressure on ordinary people. The government's overreliance on fuel imports has also increased that pressure. We, therefore, urge the government to heed the advice of experts and start phasing out capacity payments while adopting a policy of exploring gas reserves within the country and focusing on developing renewables. Both endeavours would, in the long run, reduce this unhealthy reliance on expensive imported fuels and enormously benefit the people.

Rural primary schools falling behind

Authorities must take better care of rural students

It is disconcerting to see the deteriorating state of many primary schools in rural Bangladesh. Two studies recently unveiled by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) have brought this issue to the fore by highlighting the lack of learning facilities in Thakurgaon and Nilphamari. Apparently, there are no libraries at nine out of 10 primary schools in Nilphamari and seven out of 10 schools in Thakurgaon. And only 17 percent of students in Thakurgaon and 26 percent of students in Nilphamari use existing libraries. Moreover, 54 percent of schools in Thakurgaon and 59 percent in Nilphamari lack internet facilities. There are many such details in the study reports that paint a troubling picture of primary education at the district level.

Besides the lack of proper learning tools, many respondents have also complained about not receiving grants since the pandemic or the allocated funds being insufficient. This is hardly shocking, however, given the history of meagre budget allocations for education. The pandemic's effect on the sector has been widespread and well-documented, and as such, we had expected that the budget for FY2023-24 would support the increased need for learning recovery. Yet, the proposed allocation of 1.76 percent of the GDP for education ministries happens to be the lowest in 15 years. With the global median value for expenditure on education being 4.45 percent of GDP, it is disappointing that the government has been skirting around the 2 percent mark for so long.

This is despite the government's own data showing that at least 17.62 lakh students dropped out between 2020 and 2021. Of them, 14.5 lakh were primary school students. Clearly, the primary education system, especially at the district level, needs a massive overhaul. Why then are our education authorities still neglecting it? If we are to build a knowledge-based society to meet the challenges of the future, we must prioritise primary education and make all resources available for the students. As well as higher budgetary allocations, there must be more qualified teachers, better-equipped classrooms and other necessary facilities to prepare our future leaders.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Whose footpaths are those?

As the number of vehicles has increased on a tremendous scale in Dhaka over the last few decades, we often see many vehicles, particularly Leguna, motorcycle, etc, occupying space on the footpaths in many places. Already, many of the footpaths in the city are occupied by vendors, forcing pedestrians to jaywalk. And whatever space has been left for the pedestrians on the footpaths are now being occupied by the vehicles. We still see arrogant motorcyclists honking on the footpaths to clear the pedestrians out of their way. Such practices must stop. The authorities must do something to keep the footpaths free for the pedestrians.

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Dhaka University's research predicament



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A recent report published in this daily, titled "DU struggles to spend measly research funds," retells the woeful state of research in the country, especially in its century-old, heritage-laden premier academic institution. It also shows how research is viewed at three levels: by university research staff, by the university administration, and by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

At a broad level, the report reflects the lack of conviction about and commitment to research in higher education; it also exposes a disturbing lack of understanding of how to nurture research. For example, Prof Dil Afroza Begum alludes to her knowing that "Dhaka University cannot spend all the allocated funds." Why was the amount allocated then, and what role can the UGC play here to facilitate the conduct of good research?

As a colleague suggested, sprinkling research money among the public universities will not improve their research performance and reputation. It will merely provide an illusion that the UGC is pushing research while encouraging mediocrity. The system must allow for competition between researchers and/or universities.

Also, offering a fixed research budget (Tk 260,000 for arts and humanities and Tk 300,000 for science and technology) by the UGC is a serious problem: grant allocations must be determined by what each research proposal purports to accomplish.

Beyond money, the UGC must also establish a clear vision for research, develop an ambitious research agenda to pursue, and create SMART goals that the universities must realise. Otherwise, the regulatory body will make little headway in providing research leadership.

Perhaps, if the UGC would take the pains to understand how the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health in the US guides the nation's research agenda, or how the National Research Foundation (NRF) in Singapore sets the national direction for R&D, funds strategic initiatives and nurtures research talent, the commission may be able to take a page out of their playbook.

Administration within the university also poses many challenges. Insufficiency of grants allocated to support research is a common refrain. DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Akhtaruzzaman indicated, "The allocation for research is too small to do basic research. Our teachers... lose interest due to the small budget." It is widely understood, however, that it's the research idea (proposal) that comes first, not the money: when a university is conducting state-of-the-art research and breaking new ground in various fields, recognised globally, what UGC

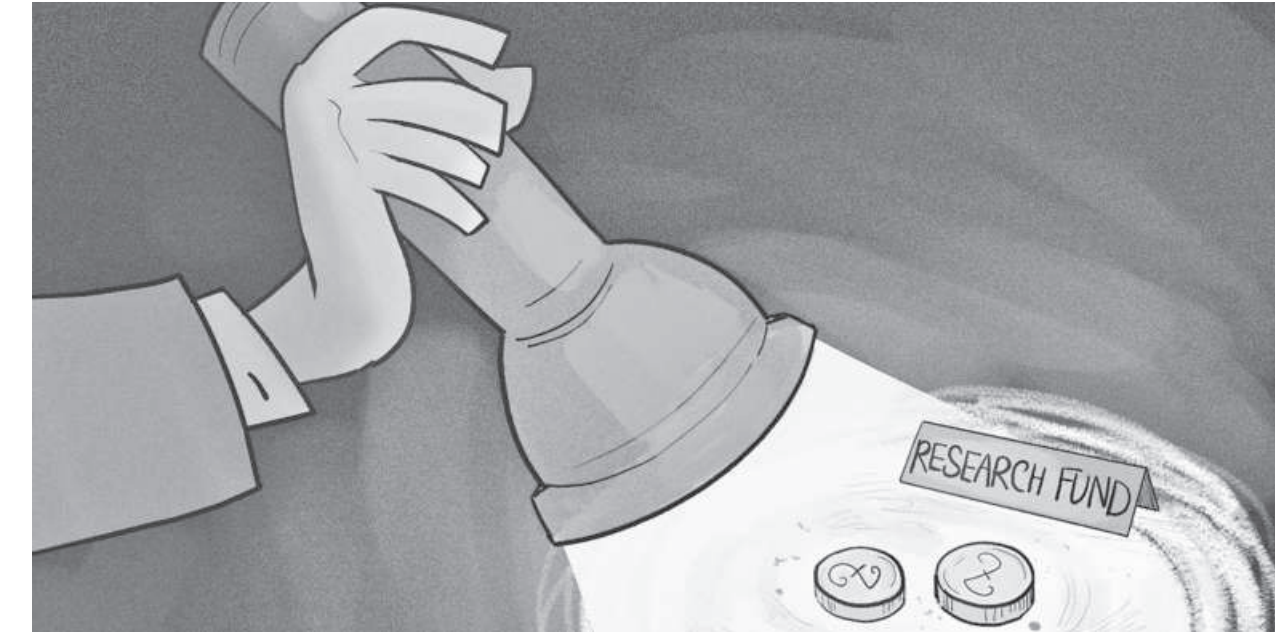


ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

official would have the temerity to deny research funds? With over a hundred years to claim research prominence, where is the groundbreaking research?

Prof Mamtaz Uddin Ahmed observes that researchers and the authorities of the research centres are not serious [about conducting research]. But why are they not serious? Why create research centres then? Has the administration analysed "why" faculty are not interested in research? Faculty opting for research with [larger] NGO funds is a small clue in the larger scheme of things.

Prof ABM Faroque, former faculty member at DU's pharmacy department, has his fingers in the right spot, "It is the failure of the university authorities that they could not use the funds properly." Prof Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan also states, correctly, that "a research-oriented academic and administrative structure [would] make teachers more dedicated to research." The question that "must" be raised is: "Who is in overall charge of research at Dhaka University? With what competencies? Under what innovative administrative structure?"

The Pennsylvania State University, where I worked for over two decades, has a position of Vice-President of Research responsible for managing university-wide research and pursuing grants from the federal government, industry, as well as private sources. Macquarie University in Australia, similarly, has a Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research who oversees training and partnerships, research integrity and development, tracking research performance, and facilitating innovation and commercialisation. The people hired for these positions are themselves research-proficient and

have a keen understanding of how to guide research.

At the faculty/researcher level, Prof Barua seems to take issue with submitting research proposals. In any decent research system, a proposal is mandatory, which is then peer-reviewed in a competitive environment that includes both public and private universities. But if he is alluding to the inordinate time it takes for the UGC to process the proposals – and many

researchers concur – this deficiency must be corrected.

Then there is a group of academics who want all the perks without putting in the hard work. Why else would they "oppose the university's decision, made last year, mandating PhD degrees to get promoted as associate professors and professors?" This reflects an "entitled" mindset among some academics that has consistently worked against building research excellence in the universities. In many research-aspiring countries, these individuals would have been quickly terminated, unless they are demonstrably outstanding teachers committed to teaching tracks.

Failing to spend the "measly amount" of funds since 2018-19 reflects many problems in the university: of having far too many low-calibre research faculty; incompetence in budgeting for research; inability to conceive and drive attractive research agendas; poor research incentives; lack of transparency and accountability; nasty power politics within (and beyond) the institution; and poor leadership at various tiers (from department heads, straight up to the UGC) oblivious of how research systems are evolving in other countries.

A research university that is unable to spend Tk 10 crore (in 2020-21), roughly equivalent to \$1 million, in a single academic year, in a world hungry for research funds (Johns Hopkins had an annual research budget of \$3.2 billion in 2021) also speaks to the character and composition of the university and the calibre and motivation of its staff. The dereliction of a fundamental purpose of universities – knowledge creation – is a travesty that, thankfully, is being increasingly questioned today!

If the strategic role of research in our

competitive research tracks, and ensuring proper administration of research. Today, Singapore has two top-ranked universities (National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University). It also has A*STAR, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research, a top-notch research institute.

I recall proposing a National Research Council (NRC) in the Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2018-2030. As in the US and Singapore, this entity was envisaged to lead national research initiatives tied to national development priorities. Six years have already elapsed with no signs of the NRC.

If research is to be advanced in Bangladesh's higher education system, three immediate system changes are suggested:

- * Stop disbursing research funds to the public universities individually. Centralise the funds under an entity like the NRC.

- * Make faculty/universities (public and private) compete for grants with proposals being peer-reviewed; grant amounts must be what an approved research requires.

- * Designate a "Coordinating Office" at the UGC (or NRC) that will lead the research agenda and be held accountable for advancing research performance in stages.

With knowledge as the new global currency, and with nations even in our region "scrambling to create research universities," lack of understanding of how to nurture research in our universities is not only disquieting, it portends serious difficulties for the growth of the higher education system ever reliant on knowledge produced in other countries. It is time to take the bull by its horns!

An ode to local economies



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

One of my morning walks takes me to a women's medical college and hospital which also has an abundance of vegetable gardens and fruit trees; out of view is a cow shed. From a small stand, farmers sell fresh milk, vegetables and mangoes. On Friday mornings, I visit a bigger farmers' market, this one run by farmers coming from a village outside of Dhaka. In addition to vegetables, bananas, papayas and milk, there are duck eggs and small local chicken eggs.

Most of my trips within the city are in my neighbourhood, easily accessible by foot or by rickshaw. Along the way, I pass a proliferation of tiny local shops and an array of vendors selling nearly everything imaginable. When it's hot, there are people selling coconut water; in the winter, the *pitha* stands are abundant.

In the United States, where I'm from, it is possible to go from birth through death without ever purchasing a

single product or service from a small, independent business. So when people ask me if I'm happy to be in Bangladesh, it is not difficult to say yes. Yes, despite the heat, pollution, and traffic congestion. Yes, despite the cacophony of horns. Because I truly value local economies and local cultures.

Nor am I alone. This year, as for the past four years, grassroots groups across the world celebrated World Localisation Day last week. Given all that's wrong with our societies and our planet, more than a hundred groups and networks united to showcase the healing power of local economies and local communities.

The solutions being put forth are as varied as the organisations supporting them under the umbrella of the international NGO Local Futures. There are groups active in holistic education, in sustainable agriculture, and those campaigning for strong local governance and the control

of unaccountable transnational corporations currently supported by trade and investment treaties. What they have in common is the recognition that strong local economies can help heal our planet and our societies.

These are organisations that believe in interactions, not just transactions – in shortening the distance, both physical and metaphorical, between producers and consumers. They are showing that there is an alternative to our profit-driven economies that are currently dominated by transnational corporations and big banks. And that solution lies in local communities and local economies.

According to Helena Norberg-Hodge, convenor of the World Localisation Day campaign, "Globalisation has failed us. It has concentrated wealth and power in the hands of unaccountable corporations and accelerated resource consumption and pollution. And now, as the cost of living skyrockets across the world, people are realising the current economy is actually impoverishing the vast majority – middle classes included."

The growing international movement for localisation manifests itself in a number of ways, including farmers' markets, community gardens, local business alliances, local banks and credit unions. Activists and organisers

are demonstrating the potential to have strong local economies without generating more pollution and environmental destruction. In fact, we can have more jobs while actually restoring our damaged environment.

It is easy to feel hopeless in the face of global crises. But as those who read my columns know, I am a relentless optimist. It is easy to be one when positive signs abound. Every child I see grinning as he or she races by on a bicycle, every shoe repairman exchanging a few friendly comments with his customer, every woman smiling and waving at me from over her rickshaw van loaded with pineapples, reminds me of the resilience of local communities and the vast potential of local economies.

It is tempting to be dazzled by the promises of economic growth, development, and globalisation. It is pleasant to believe that with rising incomes we can say goodbye to the many problems that plague our country. But it is also vital to remember that not all change is progress; that not all gains outweigh the costs; that sometimes we possess something too valuable to let it be destroyed.

Wherever the future takes us, let's be sure that we shape it in partnership with, rather than in destruction of, our local economy and local communities.