

Are we listening to young people?

They must be able to enjoy the benefits of a functioning democracy

A just-unveiled study by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh has given us some sobering statistics regarding what our young people are thinking. The data reveals that young people are worried about their present and future. Constraints on freedom of expression, widespread corruption, joblessness and poor governance in the country are some of the factors behind their frustrations.

Importantly, around 43 percent of those surveyed are hesitant about exercising their freedom of expression, while 41.4 percent have demanded the scrapping of the notorious Digital Security Act (now replaced by Cyber Security Act) and similar laws as well as administrative measures that severely restrict freedom of expression. Meanwhile, 69.4 percent believe that Bangladesh's development is being hampered by corruption and nepotism. More than half of the respondents are registered voters, but they have never voted in the national elections.

With a sample size of more than 5,000 people aged between 18 and 35, this is a study that deserves to be taken seriously and properly acted upon. The pessimism reflected in it demonstrates how – despite all the infrastructural development achieved by the government – some fundamental prerequisites for a thriving democracy are starkly missing. The result is that young people are becoming ever more disillusioned with our political culture that seems to have ignored their needs and aspirations.

Being able to voice their opinion or protest injustices and having financial security are important to young men and women. But the reality is, many are under claustrophobic conditions. They are deprived of quality education and the right skills to be gainfully employed. They are not allowed to say what they feel and must live in fear of being incarcerated if they do. Most young people have to confront the reality of not getting the jobs that will provide them with a secure, decent future. Is this how we are utilising our much-talked-about demographic dividend?

We are clearly at a critical juncture and must make decisions to change the bleak outlook of the youth. Young people must feel free to express their opinions without the threat of repercussions from the state. They must have access to quality education, skills training and job opportunities. According to the survey, around 60 percent of the respondents suggested having a registration system for the unemployed youth so that they can get jobs. Forty-eight percent recommended a low interest rate loan for young entrepreneurs.

Therefore, political parties, especially the ruling party, must wake up and address these issues that profoundly affect the well-being and worldview of the youth. Not doing so will not bode well for Bangladesh's future, which is overwhelmingly dependent on its young population in every step of its development.

We must expand our export capacity

RMG again raises hope as exports to non-traditional markets grow

At a time when the economy is going through a turbulent period, it is heartening to know that the apparel sector's dependency on traditional markets, such as the UK, US, Europe and Canada, has reduced to some extent. According to a recent report, non-traditional markets accounted for 19.3 percent of the total \$11.6 billion earned through garment exports during the July-September period of the current fiscal year. Seen from another perspective, garment exports to non-traditional markets grew by 25 percent year-on-year. Among the major non-traditional markets, exports to Japan, Australia and South Korea have increased exponentially.

This is undoubtedly a reassuring sign of progress for the RMG sector considering that, around this time last year, a looming recession in the US and EU led to decreasing orders for garment factory owners. The push for market diversification has served both as a fail-safe and a logical step forward. For a country that is on the path to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026 – upon which the current benefits of duty-free market access will come to an end – there is no alternative to being competitive and future-oriented. Focusing more on non-traditional markets will ease things for Bangladesh, so it must continue to explore new markets and increase exports.

As the scope of growth in Europe, the biggest market for Bangladeshi exporters, continues to shrink, it is vital to put our eggs in different baskets. We hope to see further growth in the tapped markets of Australia, Japan and South Korea, and at the same time, we encourage RMG business owners to explore the untapped potential of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Just as the apparel sector is treating export diversification with the importance that it deserves, we hope that other exporting sectors will also come forward and do the same. Doing so, and increasing their export share in the process, is essential for the sake of a sustainable economic growth. In the short term, it can also help increase our foreign exchange reserves, which is critically low at the moment. In the eighth Five-Year Plan (2020-25), the government has rightly attached top priority to diversifying export sectors. The progress in the apparel industry can be a case study for the authorities to expand the export capacity of other sectors.

New Message

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EDITORIAL

How RTI helped Sri Lanka manage its crisis

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

The importance of people's right to information (RTI) for good governance and sustainable development is often loudly proclaimed but quietly ignored by people and governments alike. It is heartening, therefore, that a recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) report prescribed a greater role for the RTI law to prevent a recurrence of the kind of financial and political crisis faced by Sri Lanka early last year – and to assure the country's steady recovery.

The report emerged from the Sri Lankan government's request to the IMF earlier this year to undertake a Governance Diagnostic Assessment (GDA) of its efforts, following the crisis, to stabilise the country and its economy. These included a combination of steps to restore fiscal and debt sustainability, improve governance, and reduce corruption risks.

The findings and recommendations of the GDA provide an excellent assessment of Sri Lanka's governance system and a comprehensive prescription of corrective measures to overcome continuing impediments. For RTI enthusiasts, the most welcome aspect of the recommendations is their emphasis on a more transparent and accountable governance, and the role RTI can play in ensuring that.

The GDA's findings revealed widespread and continuous governance weaknesses and corruption vulnerabilities across critical areas of governance, as well as their macroeconomic impact. But the study also found a silver lining behind the clouds. Underlining the vital importance of RTI, the GDA commended the government steps to establish people's right to information and create an institutional framework for protecting them. It particularly highlighted the admirable role the Right to Information Commission (RTIC) of Sri Lanka has played since its inception to uphold them and recommended further strengthening of its capacity and ability. Such a role, it underlined, is "particularly consequential for anti-corruption efforts since many of the requests for intervention come from groups that are traditionally most exposed to corruption and the abuse of public power, including women and minority groups."

The GDA also noted that a number of recent bills in parliament have the potential to constrain the scope of RTIC, excluding "sensitive" matters from its jurisdiction, and recommended that no future laws should limit the reach of RTIC, and relevant policies and rules concerning new anti-corruption, anti-terrorism and privacy legislation should reflect this position. It underscored that the "impunity for misbehaviour enjoyed by officials undermines trust in the public sector and compounds concerns

over limited access to efficient and rule-based adjudication process for resolving disputes."

The IMF diagnostic assessment of Sri Lanka and its recommendations are of immense value for all developing

from the judiciary. This is imperative because such commissions' decisions are often laced with government pressures of various sorts.

And thirdly, information commissions must be composed of

to higher levels of usage of the law, the Information Commission Bangladesh will have to continue to deal with matters that have little or no impact on the overall governance in the country. One reason why the experiences of the



Sri Lanka's RTI law enabled its citizens to probe government work thoroughly

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

nations, including Bangladesh. The recommendations on the increased role of RTIC are of particular relevance. Information commissions can indeed play a vital role in promoting transparency and accountability in governance by facilitating unencumbered monitoring by citizens of the work of their governments.

However, what Sri Lanka's RTIC could achieve through its commitment and determination may not be possible for other information commissions in the region, as ground conditions are not the same everywhere. The success of information commissions depend on a number of factors, foremost being the existence of a civil society determined to advance the objectives of the law. Bangladesh's law clearly states that it has been enacted to empower citizens so that they can play a role "to establish transparency and accountability of public offices... so that corruption will lessen, and good governance will be established." Citizens have been explicitly bestowed with a responsibility to serve as watchdogs over public offices and probe their work. Seeking information from public bodies relating to their responsibilities is a means to play that role and not only an opportunity to advance personal goals.

The second critical factor is the existence of citizen groups ready to agitate and undertake collective measures to safeguard proper implementation of the law. They are to serve as watchdogs, including for proper application of the arbitration mechanism by the information commissions. Should the latter fail, they must be ready to seek assistance

people known for their experience, objectivity, impartiality and integrity. Most RTI laws provide for specific rules and procedures for their selection so that the views of different stakeholders are considered.

All the three elements appear to have been largely met in Sri Lanka. This explains why its RTI law, which came into existence much later than in most other countries of South Asia, was able to make such impressive progress within a short period of time.

On the first factor, a quick look at the list of issues invoked by Sri Lankan citizens in recent years to probe government work is illustrative. It included assets and liabilities of people's representatives, the cost of overseas visits by prime ministers and MPs, lavish spending of public funds by ministers, probe report on misbehaviour of the prison minister, status of foreign currency reserve, approval of power project by the Adani Group of India, Chinese investment in Sri Lanka, ingredients contained in imported milk powder, purchase of expired tear gas, investment of Employee Provident Fund and Employee Trust Funds by the central bank, aircraft purchase deal between Sri Lankan Airlines and PIA, excessive infant deaths at the Vavuniya General Hospital, and unclassified information available with the cabinet office.

The Sri Lankan RTIC was thus given an opportunity by citizens to decide on matters impacting the nation as a whole. Compared to these, RTI requests in Bangladesh are largely of a mundane nature dealing with personal and secondary issues. Unless we graduate

two countries are so different is that in Sri Lanka, many of the public interest requests emanated from applications submitted by NGOs and public service organisations such as Verite, Sri Lanka Press Institute, and People's Movement for Free Health Service. Interestingly, there is hardly any use of RTI by similar agencies in Bangladesh.

On collective efforts by Bangladeshis to agitate against or challenge the decisions of the Information Commission even in the few contentious cases it dealt with, involving the state and citizens, the experience has been pitiable. There is little to no civil society surveillance of the decisions and no combined effort to help aggrieved users check their propriety in courts. The RTI Forum which was created earlier is all but defunct.

Added to this is the opaque manner in which information commissioners are chosen in Bangladesh. Though the law provides for a selection committee composed of persons representing relevant branches of the government and civil society, citizens come to know the names of the commissioners only after they have been chosen. The need for a more transparent selection process cannot be overemphasised.

With all these impediments, it is difficult to visualise how the Information Commission Bangladesh could play the role prescribed for the RTI in the GDA on Sri Lanka. The latter expounds why and how better utilisation of RTI law can help governments and the people to jointly combat weaknesses and vulnerabilities in governance – at all times, but more so during crises.

Is carbon offsetting a good climate solution?



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

How will global textile supply chains meet their ambitious targets of reducing carbon emissions? This is a pertinent question, one which is very much the elephant in the room. Across the broader industry, there has been research that at least two-thirds of major corporations will use some kind of carbon offsetting tool to meet climate targets. In other words, they will reduce their own emission where possible, but if this is not enough to help them achieve net zero or other targets, they will invest in projects that reduce or capture greenhouse gases to make up for any shortfall.

While carbon offsetting has gained momentum and support, it is not without its share of critics. There are many obvious pros to carbon offsetting and, done correctly, it can be an effective tool. However, some key concerns need to be addressed.

At a basic level, offsetting enables immediate action to reduce emissions. By investing in projects such as reforestation, renewable energy, or methane capture from landfills, individuals and organisations can

effectively mitigate their carbon footprint immediately. Offsetting enables businesses to act now, and many believe this is required to address the urgency of the climate crisis.

Furthermore, offsetting projects can be located anywhere in the world, allowing people and companies to support initiatives in regions with the greatest need or potential for emission reduction. They often see a transference of money and resources from the richer Global North to the poorer Global South. In theory, this is a positive, socially equitable outcome.

Technological advancements in carbon capture are another potential benefit. Offsetting encourages the development and adoption of green technologies. Investments in renewable energy, for example, can accelerate the transition to a sustainable energy infrastructure. Many businesses are adopting carbon offsetting as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This not only demonstrates a commitment to environmental stewardship but also helps improve a company's public

image and customer loyalty.

At the fundamental level, carbon offsetting is a means to comply with emission reduction targets and regulations imposed by governments and international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. It offers a cost-effective way for companies to meet their legal obligations.

All of this said, in the past couple of years, there has been significant kickback against carbon offsetting. I am seeing more and more people saying offsetting is simply a means of "paying to pollute," enabling companies to continue business as usual.

One of the primary criticisms is the difficulty in measuring offsetting's true impact. Some projects may not deliver the expected emission reduction, leading to "greenwashing," through which companies claim to be more environmentally responsible than they truly are.

Offsetting may also create a moral hazard, as it allows individuals and companies to continue emitting greenhouse gases without making substantial efforts to reduce their emissions directly. Besides, where do we draw the line in terms of how much of their emissions they offset and what level of offsetting is acceptable?

It is also notable that the longevity of emission reduction from offset projects is not guaranteed. Reforested areas, for example, may face threats from deforestation or wildfires. Forests being cut down shortly after project completion and industry corruption

have made global headlines in the past. The carbon offset market is not immune to unethical practices. There have been cases of offset projects causing harm to local communities, such as displacing indigenous populations or depriving them of their land rights. Given that these projects are often carried out by third parties in remote parts of the world, can fashion companies using them be sure they are ethical and responsible?

Critics have also argued that carbon offsetting can perpetuate global inequalities. Wealthier individuals and corporations can afford offsets, while the burden of emission reduction falls disproportionately on marginalised communities and developing countries. Some also argue that offsetting can divert attention and resources away from systemic changes needed to address climate change. A focus on individual actions and offsetting may overshadow the necessity of comprehensive policy changes and emission reduction.

To harness the benefits of carbon offsetting while minimising its drawbacks, I believe it is crucial to ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to ethical principles in offset projects. Moreover, offsetting should complement, rather than substitute for, direct emission reduction efforts at the source. Ultimately, a holistic approach – combining offsetting, systemic changes and reduction strategies – is essential for addressing the climate crisis.