

# Evidence to policy. Truth to power.



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“Policy” as an institutional process is a nebulous mixture of concepts, thinking, ideology, values, pragmatism, interests and, hopefully, evidence: prior, during, and afterwards. This mix constitutes the true rationality of any policy process and generates stakeholders at different stages of formulation and conclusion. Typically, such stakeholders are arranged sequentially across the policy cycle as well as compartmentalised into sectoral responsibilities. This frames the room for initiative and implementation as well as responsibility and accountability (or avoidance thereof) for outputs and, more importantly, outcomes. These are the elements of governance which occur within political economies characterised by inequalities of class, status, and power. The more recent claims made by governments the world over for “evidence-based” policy seem like hubris when this social complexity is acknowledged: a Foucauldian attempt to rhetorically disguise naked politics in pursuit of legitimation; often a process of pursuing specific interests but presenting them as universal.

Thus, for the researcher and social analyst, any claim to influence policy prescriptions and outcomes via the presentation of evidence must be treated with suspicion, since the policy path is not linear but twisted. Attributing impact is nigh on impossible. The only reasonable claim is that of “participation in a process” alongside other players. With these caveats, I can briefly illustrate some earlier policy participation in Bangladesh as part of seeking to be applied, useful, and practical to those I care about.

My participation began by interpreting the significance of our findings in *Exploitation and the Rural Poor* (BARD, 1976 and 1978). If the cooperatives were being captured by the relatively well-off families in Cumilla’s minifundist conditions, then how could this be an appropriate model to roll out across other more unequal regions of quasi-feudal Bangladesh? This conclusion was reinforced by emerging data on landlessness and a later paper by myself—*Rural Class Formation in Bangladesh* (1981), informed by Abu Abdullah’s work. This analysis undermined

the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development lobby which wanted to replicate the Cumilla model all over the country. The debates were difficult, and inconvenient for the liberation narrative of a homogenous nation of small family farmers. In terms of causation, my work, together with data from 1977 on the extent of rural landlessness for whom these cooperatives policies were irrelevant, helped to convince well-placed senior bureaucrats that replication should be abandoned.

From these beginnings, attention turned to developing opportunities for the landless. My “sponsor” in the Government of Bangladesh (secretary of agriculture, following a stint in rural development) asked me for ideas for the landless, given the Washington Consensus push towards privatised groundwater irrigation for the emerging *irri boro* season. My agrarian knowledge led to a paper on “landless irrigation” whereby landless groups could own shallow tube wells and sell irrigation water to

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farming peasants with fragmented plots in a “command area.” With the government’s approval, I took the ideas to Proshika, which pursued this productivity inclusion approach over the 1980s and into the 90s, despite some opposition from the appropriate technology lobby which considered modern, mechanical,

and expensive technologies beyond the capacity of the poor to manage.

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to offer technical advice about rearing the fingerlings species they were selling. We published *Trading the Silver Seed* (UPL, 1992) to describe all this.

With Iflah Sharif, I co-edited two books on microfinance (in 1997 and 2002) which effectively judged the claims made for it. In our first book, *Who Needs Credit* (UPL, 1997), we concluded that its success was more

*Franchise State*, which pointed out the contradiction between donor support for improved governance and accountability of state practice and the simultaneous support for large NGOs to provide non-rights-based essential services to the poor, effectively substituting for what the state should be providing to its entitled citizens. Poor clients had no recourse to complaint about services

Dhaka! These two remarkable CSP men wanted other lines of knowledge from outside their own rigid hierarchies, and they wanted “truth to power” which they rarely received from their own junior staff, except a few confident high-flying joint secretaries.

I had both access and ongoing dialogue. I brought books for Obaidullah and Anis from the UK. The relationship with Obaidullah was a more informal friendship, meeting often in his official residence on Minto Road. With Anis, it was a little more formal, in the office, in his *darbar*! I met ministers too, drafting some speeches for them when they were attending international conferences to be addressed in English. I was even an advisor to Obaidullah and his team at the annual World Bank Aid Review in Paris, where we all convened, somewhat to the surprise of the World Bank delegation. So there was trust, too.

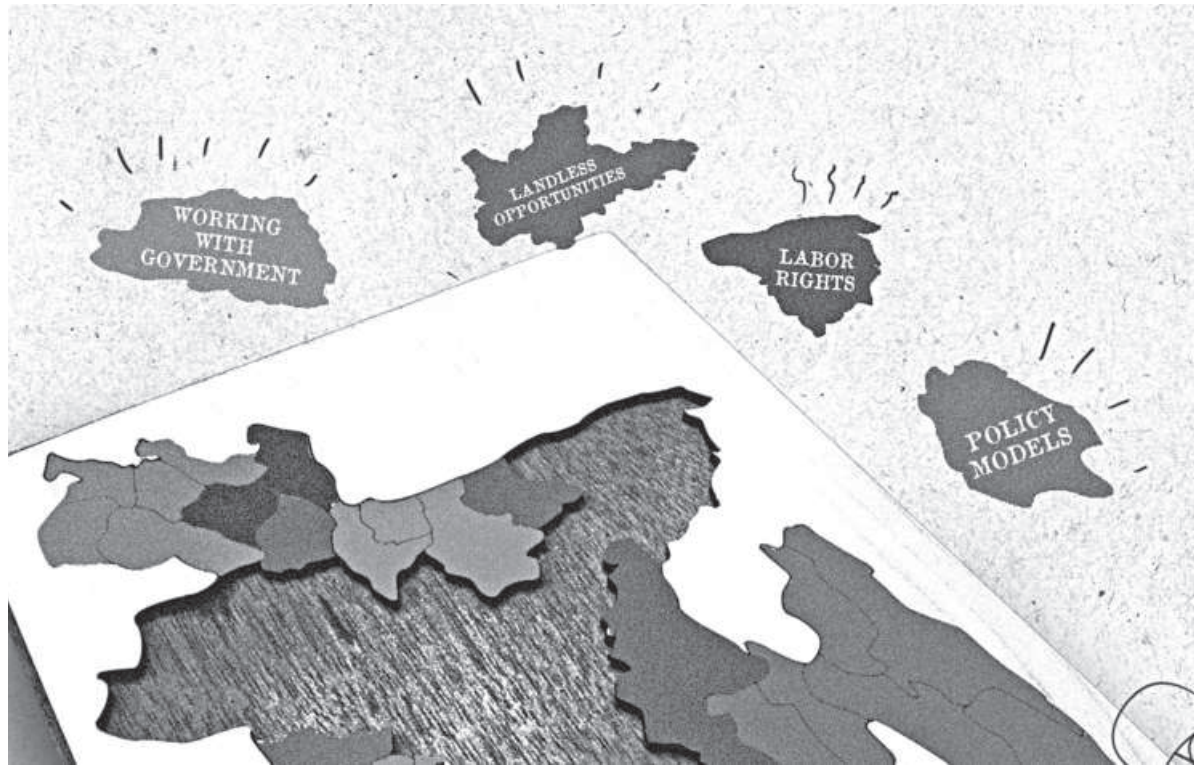
However, in the mid 1980s, I felt increasingly bothered about this proximity to a military regime (Ershad’s) and withdrew below the radar to concentrate on working with Proshika and some related assignments with donors, which kept me in touch with the government.

The lesson from this experience is that evidence has to be mediated to policy through processes of advocacy entailing sustained dialogue and trust. And where friendships develop as a function of regular contact, this can be enjoyable between mutual enthusiasts as can happen between colleagues anywhere. In addition to offices, tea, and informal dinners, more recently a couple of us from the University of Bath, together with BIDS, have been invited to present our extreme poverty research to All-Party Parliamentary Group MPs in the Jatiya Sangsad. In parallel, we convened workshops for joint secretaries across relevant ministries, having drafted digestible “manifesto” materials.

Advocacy is an art requiring techniques and resilience, which many academics do not acquire and even disdain. However, in Bangladesh, many academics are very active in the realms of public discourse.

Two final points about means and ends: We should not forget the power of journalism and media speaking “truth to power,” even under hostile conditions. And, finally, my substantive purpose which links the above together? Always to extract the poor from exploitative situations. Support services have a role in that, but also powers of action and protest.

**This is the second instalment of a series of conversations on development issues between the author and The Daily Star.**



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

landless irrigation model, did I have any parallel ideas? I wrote a paper on counter-information and functional literacy so that labourers on site could avoid being cheated. The thinking went further into the idea of “Labour Contracting Societies,” so that groups of labourers could take on contracts themselves and cut out rent-seeking intermediary contractors and labour sardars. It became a case of progressive policy thwarted by corrupt vested interests, as reported in *Whose Ideas, Whose Interests?* (UPL, 1994).

In the late 1980s, after 14 years, I was asked by UKAid to see if I could find a pro-poor angle for the construction of a large-scale, public-sector fish seed multiplication farm (in Parbatipur of Dinajpur district) to support local village expansion of fish culture. I quickly learned that this project was imitating already existing private sector arrangements and was thus flawed. Someone had not done their homework and had to be ticked off! However, my research team developed the idea of using the local poor *bepari* (who collected seed, fry, and fingerlings from Parbatipur station *arotdars* to trade among villages) into extension workers for the programme, trained

in providing liquidity management to those highly dependent upon hand-to-mouth, seasonally influenced incomes enabling them to break free of usurious *mahajans*, than in generating new incomes from self-exploited labour. The second book, *Challenges for Second Generation Microfinance* (UPL 2002), confronted the model of poor people’s savings under-performing by being recycled by MFIs into loans for other poor people’s low productivity activity (albeit vital activity for subsistence and *mahajan* avoidance). Were poor savers being trapped below higher-value returns by these recycling finance arrangements?

I was significantly involved in the international review of the Flood Action Plan in 1995, which concluded by rejecting much of the Canute physical structures paradigm in favour of disaggregated coping solutions. Many vested interests within the government and among the engineering consultancy community internationally were furious with our critique.

Despite my extensive association with NGOs, especially Proshika, in the early 90s I wrote *States Without Citizens: The Problem of the*

(quality, access, inclusion) since NGOs were really charities operating in a voluntary, philanthropic way. This issue remains.

Personally, with the policy issues outlined above, from the late 1970s, I interacted quite strongly with the agriculture ministry as well as the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives at the secretary level. The secretary for the former was Obaidullah Khan, who had switched from Rural Development, with the late Anisussaman going in the opposite direction to Rural Development (see a very appreciative recent obituary by Khalid Shams in *The Daily Star*). I felt shuffled between these two officers in the secretariat, seeking joined-up thinking. I also spent time with joint secretaries. This was a remarkable experience for someone in their late 30s. And oddly, perhaps arrogantly, I did not feel the privilege at the time. That dawned on me somewhat later, when writing *Staying the Course: The Journey of a ‘Bengal’ Civilian*. That says quite a lot about youthful assertion and confidence. But I did have exposure to share when in the secretariat because I was working so much with Proshika from 1980 onwards that I was mainly outside

## What went right for Rajshahi?

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**SAYED ARAFAT ZUBAYER, MD MUSTAQIM ROSHID, and FARID KHAN**

Surrounded by the Padma River, Rajshahi is one of the oldest cities in the country and has a vibrant history. Once a city of narrow roads and hardly any tall buildings, the city’s recent eye-catching developmental transformation has been a matter of curiosity for many. Although this transition may seem like an overnight phenomenon, it is really a combination of foresight, planning, and perfect execution.

When a city-centric economy develops, many initiatives and developmental facilities are also created due to the cost advantages. Rajshahi has a rich history of being an administrative centre, even during the colonial period. As a result, it has been a place for many major government and private offices, and a centre to flock to for people from neighbouring districts.

Consequently, a middle and affluent class (MAC) emerged in the city. Presently, a significant proportion of this population consists of young people. A large portion of Rajshahi city dwellers use e-commerce services when making purchases, and many order food online or go out to eat at restaurants. They also use various MFS (mobile financial services) and debit or credit cards to pay their bills.

The increasing consumer demand being derived from the growing MAC population is an important factor behind the rise of numerous

business opportunities in the city. More and more new restaurants are opening up, and the outlets of several national services are being set up in Rajshahi city. As a result, many jobs are being generated too, and students are getting part-time jobs at these businesses. Some students are also setting up their own businesses. Gone are the days when employment in Rajshahi was limited; the city today abounds with prospects.

Rajshahi city’s huge investments in infrastructure, well-coordinated planning, and immaculate maintenance complement the city’s social overhead capital (SOC). This improvement in SOC is attracting a lot of new investments as well. Newly built high-rise commercial buildings are just one example of the city’s now vibrant real estate sector.

Substantial allocations and efforts have been made to widen and improve the city’s internal roads. Inter-district connectivity for all modes of transport has improved. Due to uninterrupted rail connectivity with nearby districts, Rajshahi citizens working in other districts now find it easy to settle at home and travel to their workplaces regularly. The connectivity with Dhaka has especially helped local businesses in transporting their goods. During the mango season, for example, the “special mango train” helps mango growers and traders to operate their businesses uninterrupted. The

foresight and willpower shown by the current mayor in implementing this in a planned manner is commendable. The city’s well-coordinated and maintained waste management system ensures its cleanliness and adds to the beautification efforts.

Moreover, an increased awareness of civic responsibility, sanitation, and environmental protection among the city’s population could be noticed in their active participation in numerous cleanliness activities, with them ultimately playing a part in making this city one of the cleanest in the country.

Nevertheless, just as every light casts a shadow, advancements can occasionally come at a high cost to certain groups or individuals. Many families suffered greatly when they were uprooted from their homes as development refugees to facilitate the current infrastructure growth and development. Some families had to go through the demolition of their homes and small businesses, and thus suffered severe financial shocks.

The city’s excessive and costly street lighting has also met criticism, the primary being that energy is being wasted lighting the streets while a large number of Rajshahi’s citizens remain without power. Environmentalists have also criticised the overexposure caused by these lights, claiming that they prevent birds and other insects from sleeping at night in roadside trees. Sadly, the city’s zoo has almost completely been transformed into a recreational park, even though it was once a mark of Rajshahi’s pride. Children no longer have the opportunity to interact with nature and learn about various animals and birds. Like the zoo, Vodra Park

in the Padma Residential Area is also going to be converted into a concrete jungle, which will not be an environmentally friendly development for the city.

On top of all this, many commercial buildings are being constructed by occupying ponds, canals, and vacant land. Sewage systems could very well

be affected by these indiscriminate development activities. The water-logging in September last year pointed out the specific failings of the city’s sewage system. Besides, various ongoing development projects are taking longer to reach completion than needed. This not only results in wastage of resources but also affects

people’s standard of living.

Regulatory authorities like the Rajshahi Development Authority (RDA) and the Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) need to play a more active role in ensuring sustainable development for this city that has huge potential to be a model for the country’s major urban centres.

### CROSSWORD

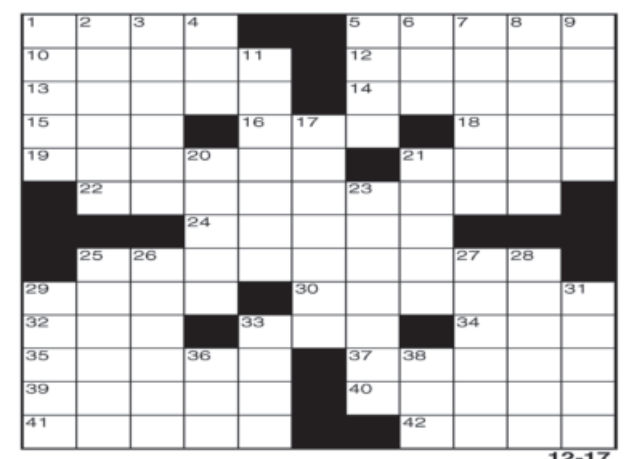
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Honey bunch
- 5 Cull site
- 10 Knight wear
- 12 Heart outlet
- 13 Stately
- 14 Car parts
- 15 Put away
- 16 Opposite of post-
- 18 Bolt partner
- 19 Petite
- 21 Monopoly pair
- 22 “Amsterdam” co-star
- 24 Took steps
- 25 “La La Land” co-star
- 29 Thunder sound
- 30 Bearlike
- 32 Galley item
- 33 Gorilla, for one
- 34 Garage sight
- 35 Annoys
- 37 Fragrance
- 39 Potato dumpling
- 40 Floor squares
- 41 Good judgment
- 42 Soccer legend

#### DOWN

- 1 Predictably trite
- 2 Hot
- 3 Davidtz of “Mansfield Park”
- 4 Note after fa
- 5 Walk through water
- 6 Milne youngster
- 7 Sly, in a way
- 8 Hit
- 9 Refinement
- 11 Copy
- 17 Gathers one’s strength
- 20 Chaplin persona
- 21 Nitwits
- 23 Fall back
- 25 Galahad’s mother
- 26 Game fish
- 27 Kidman of “The Others”
- 28 Canine coat
- 29 Bottle toppers
- 31 Wipe away
- 33 Tennis great Arthur
- 36 Snaky shape
- 38 Tear



### SUNDAY’S ANSWERS



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