

## Be prudent with new budget planning

### Good governance crucial for overcoming economic challenges

The government is preparing to place its first proposal for the national budget of FY2024-25—the first budget after the 12th general election—at a time when the economy is going through a critical stage. Experts have, therefore, pointed out three major challenges—namely slow economic growth, growing debt burden, and inflationary pressure—that need to be addressed in the new budget to turn things around. We agree that these three issues indeed demand the most attention, and to make improvement on these fronts, the government must be cautious in its budgetary planning.

Bangladesh has been suffering from a persistently high inflation for over one and a half years. As per the latest data of Bangladesh Bank, inflation stood at 9.81 percent in March 2024, with the monthly average over the past 12 months reaching 9.69 percent. This is in spite of the fact that inflation has come down globally. The inflationary pressure, along with shrinking income opportunities in a post-Covid economy, has pushed low- and fixed-income groups to a point where they have had to cut corners with their dietary requirements, education, and healthcare. On the other hand, reliance on loans to meet national spending as well as debt servicing is putting substantial pressure on our foreign exchange reserves. And then there is the slow pace of GDP growth; according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), in the October-December quarter of 2023, our GDP growth stood at 3.78 percent.

Against this backdrop, the upcoming budget is going to be crucial. The expectation is to rebound from the economic slump by successfully navigating through these challenges, and to this end, the government would do well to follow expert recommendations such as restoring macroeconomic stability, widening the tax net to increase revenue collection, making judicious use of resources, etc. More importantly, good governance in the public sector is crucial. This is something to which the government must renew its commitment.

Given the critical nature of our economic situation, the government should be prudent when designing the upcoming budget. Supporting the poor and vulnerable segment of the population must be a top priority so that they don't have to continue to make painful compromises on basic needs. Resource allocation must be planned judiciously to stop wastage. And, as many experts have been suggesting, some hard decisions must be made in order to enforce discipline and accountability across the board.

## A lingering crisis in Bagerhat municipality

### Why is waste being discarded alongside roads?

The Bagerhat municipality has a nagging problem on its hands, and it is one for which it can only blame itself. According to a report, anyone entering the city is inevitably welcomed by the unsightly and foul-smelling piles of garbage lining the roadside, thanks to the municipality which has been discarding them there for a long time. The problem is exacerbated during the monsoon season when garbage flows into the nearby canal and obstructs its passage, causing contaminated water to flood the area. Worryingly still, improper disposal of waste on open grounds has been common throughout the municipality. Besides causing discomfort to commuters and pedestrians, the problem has been responsible for driving off many residents as well.

The question is, why is this dire state being allowed to persist year after year? Apparently, a multi-crore project was initiated in 2019 to establish a waste management facility on the municipal dump site in question. But its construction remains incomplete even after nearly five years. The authorities say they plan to set up a modern waste management system as part of a Tk 35 crore project that includes recycling waste into fuel oil and fertilisers. But such promises remain hollow without any tangible progress on the ground.

The Bagerhat municipality is not alone when it comes to waste mismanagement by municipalities and city corporations. Often, far from setting examples to foster responsible waste disposal habits among residents, and in the absence of designated dumping grounds and a proper waste management system, many are themselves disposing waste haphazardly. We have seen this in Mymensingh's Trishal upazila where the absence of a fixed spot turned the banks of Sutia River into a garbage dump for municipality workers. In Dhaka, we have seen city authorities allowing disposal of untreated waste into rivers. The environmental ramifications of such practices cannot be overstated.

We, therefore, urge the municipal authorities to treat waste management with the seriousness that it deserves. They all must prioritise proper disposal and recycling of waste as a fundamental public service.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Experiment with education

It seems to me that education is the only sector that experiences frequent changes in Bangladesh. Not just the syllabus and curriculum, social or historical contents but also exam formats, grading system and even the tiers of the system go through many revisions. The most recent announcement according to a recent news report is extending the primary education to Class VIII. The government's logic is, it will make education free and mandatory upto Class VIII. Girls' education is already free upto the secondary level so it will be just the boys who would receive free education for three more years. But who will benefit from the expenditure from building additional classes in primary schools and recruiting more teachers? Perhaps we need to rethink these before proposing changes.

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# How concerned should we be about food insecurity?



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The persistent high inflationary pressures in Bangladesh over the last two years have heightened concerns regarding the erosion of food security among a large section of the population. Food security is of paramount importance in the country due to its high number of poor and vulnerable population, coupled with high population density, vulnerability to climate change, and reliance on agriculture.

As a country where a significant portion of the population is engaged in agriculture, with a high concentration of urban poor and vulnerable people who solely rely on the market to access food, stable food availability is crucial not only for ensuring human welfare and social cohesion, but also for enhancing the productivity of our future workforce. Food security is, therefore, intertwined with the economic and social stability and national security of the country.

Beyond the economic turmoil induced by events such as the Covid pandemic and subsequent inflationary pressures, Bangladesh contends with recurrent natural calamities, including floods and cyclones. These events pose a significant threat to the country's food security, as they have the potential to obliterate agricultural yields and disrupt supply chains. Strengthening food security means building resilience against such events, ensuring that food distribution systems are robust and emergency food reserves are in place. It also involves investing in sustainable agricultural practices and technologies, which can increase crop yields and diversify food sources.

In 2018, the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) executed a nationally representative survey covering 10,500 households across Bangladesh. During October and November 2023, SANEM, in partnership with the Global Development Institute (GDI) at the University of Manchester, embarked on another round of surveys with the same sample successfully covering 9,065 households. The latest survey results provided important and alarming insights related to the food security situation in Bangladesh.

The 2023 survey included questions which helped construct a Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) following the 2022 guidelines of the Food and Agriculture Organization

of the United Nations (FAO). The FIES consists of eight questions regarding people's access to adequate food. It asks, in the reference period, if the respondents (1) were worried they would not have enough food to eat, (2) were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, (3) ate only a few kinds of food, (4) had to skip a meal, (5) ate less than they thought they should, (6) ran out of food in their households, (7) were hungry but did not eat, and (8) if they went without eating for a whole day.

Each question contributes to the



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

FIES score. We conducted assessments of the FIES scores at two distinct intervals: in April 2023 and during October-November 2023. Throughout the latter period, escalations were observed across all eight indicators at the national level. Notably, poor households exhibited higher initial levels and eventual surges in these indicators. For example, the percentage of poor households concerned about insufficient food availability escalated from 56 percent in April 2023 to 67 percent in October-November 2023. Similarly, the fraction of such households unable to access nutritious food rose from 69 percent to 75 percent. The diversity of their diet also diminished, with those consuming limited varieties of food increasing from 55 percent to 64 percent. Furthermore, the incidence

both poor and non-poor households throughout Bangladesh. Among the poor, moderate food insecurity climbed by five percentage points and severe food insecurity intensified by three percentage points. Overall, moderate food insecurity rose by three percentage points, and severe food insecurity escalated by one percentage point. By October-November 2023, the prevalence of moderate food insecurity reached 29 percent in rural poor households and 32 percent in urban poor households. Alarming, seven percent of poor households in both rural and urban settings were grappling with severe food insecurity.

Over the last couple of years, escalating food prices, in tandem with diminishing real incomes, presented a formidable obstacle in Bangladesh

distortions, and taking effective actions against anti-competitive practices in food markets. Additionally, social safety nets must be strengthened to protect the most vulnerable populations from food scarcity.

The medium- to long-term strategies include bolstering agricultural productivity through modernisation and sustainable practices, enhancing storage facilities to reduce post-harvest losses, and improving supply chain infrastructure to ensure efficient distribution of food. Ultimately, a multifaceted approach that integrates economic, environmental, and social strategies will be essential for achieving long-term food security in Bangladesh, fostering a resilient society capable of withstanding future challenges.

## Why would anyone want to become a teacher?



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"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." This statement remains, to this day, one of the most incorrect sentences to have existed on earth. Aristotle said it better, "Those that know, do. Those that understand, teach." But then, teaching is doing. It's doing what many don't have the courage or patience to do; it's the act of passing on the knowledge that has sustained generation after generation, selflessly, to children who are not your own. It's one of the noblest things a person can choose to do with their life. But sadly, that's not the narrative that exists today—at least not in the case of teaching at earlier levels of education, in school and colleges, in Bangladesh.

Today, rarely anybody in Bangladesh would want to become a school teacher or a college teacher. One reason might be low pay and, associatively, the rhetoric of lesser social status—so much so that teaching is less lucrative than a high-salary job in a multinational company. And who can blame us?

The problem is that we have created a system where professions like researching and teaching are, most often, not as highly ranked on the salary

scale as entertainment or sports, which means that our teachers and doctors end up going on strikes for a better pay while an actor or a cricketer can think about buying a second or third house. I'm not arguing that teaching is more worthy of a high salary than acting, but that we have no such hierarchy where teaching is at the bottom of the career ladder.

Unfortunately, with such stark differences in salaries across these jobs, we do automatically create an invisible (or visible) hierarchy, where children would aim to become highly paid social influencers rather than teachers or scientists. At the end of the day, the narrative we set matters, and what we pay—money—is a powerful weapon in setting this narrative.

But, does this mean that increasing teachers' salaries will solve our problems? Not necessarily, because there are other important aspects that matter too. Remember, no matter what teachers are paid, there's still corruption. The corruption in how teachers are recruited as well as the lack of professionalism and the rampant

toxicity that teachers have to endure once they become teachers.

We'd be making another mistake by assuming that merely increasing teachers' pay will fix our education system. A World Bank study in 2016, based in Indonesia, found that raising teachers' salaries without changing anything else in the system didn't make them more effective teachers and didn't improve their students' test scores. However, the intervention did have some positive effects on teachers' satisfaction. Could the same be true in the case of Bangladesh?

Additionally, how much of a salary increase will actually enable teachers to comfortably and happily thrive in their profession? How much of a raise will guarantee that teachers will stop being tempted to turn to coaching centres and private tutoring? What can we do so that more and more students will actually happily aim for teaching as a career choice? We need to be able to answer these questions with rigorous and objective evidence.

The other part of the puzzle is ensuring teacher quality and ascertaining what we actually mean by a good teacher. Is a good teacher a brilliant teacher—knowledgeable and wise? What if they are knowledgeable but arrogant and unkind? Would they still be good teachers? You see, we often talk about incentivising our "best" students to go into teaching without realising that this is problematic if we continue to define "best" by grades and CGPAs, without accounting for factors

such as kindness, ethics and morality.

These factors are as important for university teachers as they are for school and college teachers. Interestingly, when it comes to university teachers, the rhetoric changes completely. An inspiring school teacher may deserve recognition but does not receive it as easily as a university teacher in Bangladesh. Arguably, today, university teachers who might not deserve any respect are crowding out good university teachers who actually deserve it. In such circumstances, nobody can blame an honest and ethical university teacher for becoming frustrated at having to endure in a system that has failed to serve its purpose.

Honestly, how can we blame our students for not having a backbone if we teachers fail to show ours? While our system owes our school and college teachers a better platform, undoubtedly, our university teachers owe our system better service—service to the nation, to discussing and debating solutions for our nation's problems, to guiding our people, to the truth.

Perhaps this much is certain: if our teachers are meant to be our torchbearers for the next generations, we need to understand that teachers don't only pass on knowledge—they play pivotal roles in passing on values, too. First, we have to agree on what values we want them to pass on. What values matter to us collectively as a society? Do we even prioritise values? If we did, would we be in the mess we are in now?