

Another day, another procurement scandal

PGCBL incident latest proof of dubious public purchases

It is astonishing to know that the state-run Power Grid Company of Bangladesh LTD (PGCBL) had imported 68 kilograms of tower bolts, nuts and washers from India for a colossal \$2,39,695—which was 1,619 times the contract value. As per the purchase agreement PGCBL submitted to the customs authorities, the actual price of the consignment should have been only \$148. Customs officials halted the consignment’s release after spotting the huge discrepancy once it reached Mongla port in April last year.

Earlier, the PGCBL had imported 178.8 tonnes of the same goods at a cost of \$3,89,252 (\$2.18 per kg), according to customs documents. The state company, on June 5 last year, wrote to the Mongla Customs House commissioner that the price was higher this time even though the import volume was less because “more goods were sent by mistake in the previous shipment.” As the PGCBL failed to provide a satisfactory reply regarding the inflated price and submit relevant documents such as LCs and invoices of two previous consignments, the Mongla Customs House refused to release it and sought the NBR’s opinion about the matter. What is interesting is that, having failed to have the items released in various ways, the power supplier is now seeking to send back the items on the pretext of a “human error” in paperwork.

The whole episode wreaks of corruption, and the regulators should immediately investigate whether any attempt was made to launder money under the pretext of importing goods, and individuals involved in it. Even the Mongla Customs commissioner in a letter to the NBR said “the statement of the importer that the consignment was carelessly sent to a wrong destination is untrue.” The PGCBL incident has been revealed at a time when corruption in public procurement, often using inflated rates, has become widespread. Over the years, we have come across many reports on similar attempts to import overpriced items by various government bodies.

Money laundering under the guise of import/export has also emerged as a huge problem for the country, draining our coffers in the process. Irregularities in public-sector procurement in particular has become common thanks in part to the authorities’ failure to hold those responsible to account. Government high-ups, however, still continue to promise prevention of wastage of resources through public procurement and project expenditure, while doing little about investigating and punishing officials involved in such clear cases of corruption. We urge the authorities to make an urgent course correction.

The rot has reached the roots

Analysis of upazila poll candidates’ wealth shows unusual rise

Not long ago, we talked about the astronomical rise in the wealth of candidates in the national election held in January, with super-rich politicians all but taking over the hallowed ground of parliament and raising serious concerns of conflict of interest. Well, the rot has reached the roots, as a similar trend of wealth accumulation has been witnessed in local elections as well. According to the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), there have been “astonishing” increases in the incomes and movable assets of incumbents in upazila parishads, including chairmen, vice-chairmen, and “vice-chairmen” in reserved posts for women. The TIB unveiled the findings of its analysis of candidates’ affidavits ahead of their participation in the first phase of upazila polls, which is set to take place today.

Some of the findings are really shocking. For example, the TIB found that, since 2014, the incomes of incumbent candidates rose by up to 18,233 percent while their movable assets soared by up to 4,251 percent. The pace of change in their financial status beggars belief. In some cases, the rate of increase in candidates’ income and wealth is even higher than that of candidates in the national election, the TIB says. Moreover, a whopping 117 candidates have moveable assets worth at least Tk 1 crore. About 56 percent of the candidates are also businesspersons—a trend of growth also witnessed in national elections. Additionally, at least 10 candidates own land beyond legal limits, possessing more than the allowed 100 bighas or 33 acres of land.

What does all this say about the upazila parishad elections, and indeed politics in general in Bangladesh? This cannot be accepted as normal, nor is it in line with the principles that our country associates itself with. When incumbents and aspiring candidates amass wealth at such extraordinary rates, questions of transparency, accountability, and fair competition naturally arise. It also shows that politics, whether at the upazila or national level, has turned into a lucrative avenue for amassing wealth rather than serving people’s interests. This has to change. This must change.

We urge the political leadership of the country to critically examine this situation and do the needful. The pursuit of political power must be driven by a genuine commitment to serve constituents, not as a shortcut to wealth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A war against trees?

Sometimes when I read the news, I feel as if we have declared a war against trees and forests or any green canopies that exist in Bangladesh. Take, for example, the recent fire in the Sundarbans. A recent article on it in this daily indicated that the cause of the fire might be man-made. On top of that, we do not even try to take steps to stop such incidents from occurring again. Rather, we end up cutting trees in the name of beautification or development. I wonder if we even care about the doom that we are bringing upon ourselves by continuing our assault on forests and trees.

Thomas Gomes
Khulna

Why student evaluation in the new curriculum is most challenging



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Views expressed in this article are the author’s own.

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The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has proposed a new evaluation method for secondary and higher secondary students that will require students to sit for five hours of testing for each subject: four hours of “practical” group work and an hour of “theoretical” written test. Three series of such tests are to be held at the end of Classes 10, 11 and 12; the practical test will comprise 50 percent of the final marks. An NCTB appointed teachers’ pool will conduct the practical tests. The proposed new method of evaluation has added to the already high level of concern and anxiety of parents and educators about the risks and uncertain outcomes of the new curriculum implementation process.

We know something about the validity and reliability of written examinations, but not much about the long group-work-based practical tests. How stressful will the long four-hour practical and one-hour written tests for each subject be for students in three public examinations? Given the experience of practical exams in science subjects at present, how fair and valid will these examinations be? How skilled, professional and objective will the examiners be? Are we going backwards from the goal of allaying high-stake public examination stress on students? More importantly, how sure are we that something useful will actually be measured by practical tests in the form of group work as part of a public examination?

While generally recognising the need for curriculum reform, questions have been raised about how ready the school system is and whether the minimum conditions exist regarding teachers’ capabilities, student-teacher ratio, and the basic learning environment for the ambitious curriculum changes proposed. The authorities keep assuring the public that the “experiential” teaching-learning and “continuous” school-based assessment by teachers will bring about a dramatic change in our schools—that students will turn away from memorising guidebooks and notebooks, no private tutoring and coaching will be needed, and students will not only acquire knowledge but also learn its practical application. It is difficult to trust these assurances when one observes that the practical situation of over 90 percent of the schools—both in rural and urban areas—have not changed, and no plans seem to exist to make the necessary

changes. These changes call for major investments, good planning with short- and long-term strategies, and their effective implementation.

A most complex and challenging area in education everywhere, even in developed nations, is valid, reliable and fair assessment of what students have learned in the classroom and through their own efforts. Good assessment is supposed to indicate to what extent the teaching-learning activities have helped students to learn what they are supposed to learn. It also provides feedback about what might have been the weaknesses in teaching-learning and the remedial steps that could be taken (provided that there is capacity and a plan to take remedial measures to help the lagging students).

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Two broad forms of learning assessment are practised, known as formative (continuous classroom-based assessment by teachers) and summative (assessment at the end of a year or a stage, usually a written test). The former is more about assessment for learning, to help each student learn better; the latter is assessment of what students have learnt and how the school has performed. Both are important and complementary to each other, but their purposes and methodologies are different, and therefore combining these into one composite assessment result is meaningless.

Teachers’ capabilities and skills and the essential conditions for good pedagogy in the school and the classroom, including a manageable class size and the learning content and materials (curriculum, textbooks, learning aid, etc), determine what happens in the classroom and

whether students learn. Meeting these conditions also determine if student assessment, both formative and summative, can provide useful information regarding student, teacher and school performance, and what remedial measures can be taken to improve performance. Again, there has to be the technical capacity and scope for teachers, schools, the NCTB

results require to be regularly analysed and refined to maintain the validity, reliability and fairness of the system.

Another aspect of the new curriculum is to move streams (science, humanities, and commerce), which start from Class 9 now, to the higher secondary level of Class 11. Ten common subjects for all students up to Class 10 will be Bangla, English, mathematics,



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and education boards, etc to assess and analyse the student assessment results and to act upon the findings of said analysis.

Apart from the practical obstacles to implementing the new pedagogy and the proposed learning assessment method, which have been noted above, what has not received enough attention and scrutiny is the scientific validity and soundness of the premises underlying the proposed system.

Scientific understanding of learning theory suggests that intelligence or learning capacity of students is complex and multi-dimensional. Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner’s proposition of at least seven kinds of intelligence is now widely accepted. Linguistic, visual, spatial, logical-mathematical, kinaesthetic, inter- and intra-personal communication as forms of intelligence suggest that each learner learns in uniquely different ways, and all pedagogy cannot be confined to a set pattern. Memorising facts and information as well as critically thinking about what is in memory, and reasoning about and application of facts and information in practical situations have a necessary place in learning—each individual constructing knowledge and figuring out its use in his/her own way. Everything important to know and to make use of in life cannot be put in a school curriculum. Nor can everything be tested as part of assessment. It is always a sampling of knowledge and skills considered significant. The sampling and measurement requires good technical skills, good judgement about what items are significant, and how these are put together in a test. Still, the process, tools, and the assessment

science, history and social science, digital technology, life and livelihood, religious teachings, health safety, and arts and culture. The implications of this common curriculum up to Class 10 for pedagogy and assessment can be the subject of another article. International curriculum thinking and practices (such as O and A Levels) suggest that half of the subjects such as digital technology, life and livelihood, religious teachings, health safety, and arts and culture can be made optional, and more academically inclined students could be given options, such as taking science courses (physics, chemistry, biology), advanced mathematics, and computer science. Actually, some of the subjects in the common curriculum can be better handled as systematic co-curricular activities. For this curriculum option to work, schools have to have qualified teachers and lab facilities for the subjects offered; again, investment and plans are necessary for creating the conditions for effective pedagogy and student assessment.

The old curriculum introduced a decade ago attempted in its own way to make a selection of content and a choice of pedagogic experiences. The problem was with the poor capacity to implement the pedagogy in the classroom, mainly because of deficits in teachers’ skills, capabilities and professionalism. These deficits remain and put at risk the more ambitious and complex pedagogy and learning assessment proposed. Squaring the circle requires a holistic approach to create the essential conditions for better pedagogy and learning assessment as well as looking critically at the technical soundness of both pedagogy and assessment methods envisaged.

In tackling climate change, we must aim for ‘just’ resilience



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Last month, Dhaka welcomed hundreds of delegates to the ninth edition of NAP Expo. The NAPs, or National Adaptation Plans, are the cornerstones of the mission to expedite adaptation. And this expo has been giving space to share experiences, views and progress across the world since 2013. But even after over a decade of negotiations through the UNFCCC process, the world has failed to produce a complete adaptation framework to track our adaptation actions.

In 2013, the African Group of Negotiators Experts Support (AGNES) proposed the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), which was established through the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015. The purpose of a universal adaptation framework was to speed up adaptation action and fund flow at the same level of mitigation. Sadly, the latest Adaptation Gap Report reveals that, while all the developing countries need \$215-387 billion annually to support adaptation, 90-95 percent of this money has never been seen.

At COP28 (2023) in Dubai, a

framework on the GGA called the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience was approved. This framework includes climate change impact, vulnerability and risk assessments, as well as national-level planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms. But it is missing some important elements, such as measurable indicators to track adaptation actions and the progress towards global goals. Such global indicators are tricky since adaptation is context-specific. The team working on the GGA will now fill in such gaps and return to COP30 (2025) with a complete framework.

But, being the “adaptation capital of the world” and a pioneer in community-based adaptation, can Bangladesh show a path to set adaptation indicators?

Bangladesh’s NAP (NAP2050) has a detailed monitoring and evaluation plan, listing 290 possible indicators (some are same or similar) against 28 outcomes of 23 strategic actions under six goals—very comprehensive

indeed. Almost all of these indicators are relevant to the sector an outcome belongs to. For example, under the food and livelihood security goal (Goal 2), the outcome related to climate-smart agriculture (CSA) has indicators like number of organic farms and extent of the adoption of CSA practices. How effective these proposed indicators are in measuring adaptation action is yet to be tested. But are they good enough to measure equity and justice in adaptation action?

This question may seem academic, but it also has a deep, practical reason behind it. Climate change affects different groups of people differently—thus it creates further inequity in an already unjust society. So, when we build people’s resilience against climate change, on the one hand, we need to reduce the unequal burden that climate change brings upon them. On the other hand, we should ensure equity in the distribution of adaptation benefits. These two aspects together define “just resilience,” a concept that may also be called “leaving no one behind” in climate change discourse. In mitigation, we talk about “just transition” or “Just energy transition,” where equity is ensured among people who would be affected during a shift from fossil fuel-driven economy to a renewable energy-driven one. While the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) strongly envisages just transition by 2030, we don’t explicitly bring in just resilience in our climate change conversations. But if we dig deeper into the 290 indicators of NAP2050, many talk about inclusive

adaptation action by considering gender, age and disability segregated data, accessibility to infrastructure, poverty incidences, and social conflict resolution. Many other indicators focus on gender, youth, diverse gender identities, disability in agricultural practices, co-management initiatives, field demonstrations, and awareness-building of modern technologies. A few underscores resilient WASH facilities for urban poor, and women and youth-led entrepreneurship in adaptation.

We, however, need a thorough analysis of what just resilience should mean for Bangladesh. It can be done by identifying equity and justice in the Delta Plan 2100, Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2020-2041, Climate Fiscal Framework, NAP2050, and MCPP. We then need to measure equity and justice in our resilience-building efforts by contextualising available adaptation protocols. One practical starting point would be the eight principles of Locally Led Adaptation (LLA). These principles can guide us on how equity could be mainstreamed into understanding climate change impact, identifying and prioritising collaborative adaptation action, inclusive decision-making, flexible project designing, financing those initiatives, and sustaining the same actions with transparency, accountability, local knowledge and capacity.

Through these immediate actions, Bangladesh can effectively contribute to the conversations of just resilience as the GGA framework gets finalised in the coming months.