

When policy lacks a development philosophy, failure follows



MOSHAHIDA
SULTANA

Associate Professor,
Department of Accounting,
Dhaka University. She can
be reached at moshahida@
du.ac.bd

Every elected government sets certain goals once it comes to power. Most of the time, these stated goals sound impressive. They literally set expectations among the citizens. When governments fail to meet those expectations within a few years, dissatisfaction grows among the public. In this scenario, we regularly see that election pledges have little influence on voter decisions. Instead, people come to trust their chosen government when their quality of life improves. Those state initiatives that may swiftly bring about improvements in the level of living lay the foundation for a government's legitimacy.

The new government's priorities following the election should be determined by its development philosophy. Regardless of whichever party takes power, some populist demands persist, such as lower commodity prices, higher purchasing power, and increased employment. However, these are not inherently development philosophies. These commitments are the outcome of a development philosophy. A development



Farmers spray pesticide on a potato field in an attempt to save the remaining plants from late blight disease. The photo was taken from Barunagaon village in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila.

PHOTO: STAR

philosophy answers questions such as, "For whom is development?" What type of development? And "How could progress be achieved?" In other words, the questions are: how will employment grow? How will inflation go down? How will people's incomes increase? Because in a market system, none of these things can be controlled without government intervention. If there is a war, a natural disaster, or a pandemic, all countries are affected to some degree. A country's economy is regarded as stronger if it has a higher economic capacity to swiftly use its own resources to satisfy its residents' primary needs.

In today's capitalist economy, greater emphasis is placed on efficiency and productivity, be it manufacturing, agriculture, or services. Efficiency is important, but efficiency can be achieved in numerous ways. The more important question today is

how to achieve efficiency and at what cost. When discussing development, economists currently argue that foreign investment should be increased, new factories should be built, cheap local labour should be used, exports should expand, and remittances should be increased. Apart from this discussion, there is virtually little debate about development. The reason for this is that a large section of economists has been indoctrinated to believe that we only have competitive advantages in industries where cheap labour can be employed and profits can be maximised. We must go beyond these repetitive platitudes. We must question why, over the previous fifteen years or more, while our guiding force was achieving efficiency, the country's wealthiest have become richer and poverty has risen once again.

During the interim government,

we observed how various interest groups created resistance against reform initiatives. The syndicate in the agricultural supply chain could not be eradicated. We noticed how the market was dominated by a few edible oil importing companies, and the government had little influence over them. We observed that rental and quick rental power plants, built through a government-business nexus, have not been shut down. Despite the fact that rural electricity reform is desperately required, we saw how contractors and businesses colluded with the Rural Electrification Board to impede reform. We discovered that merely subsidising fertiliser is not sufficient. If dealers are not monitored, farmers do not benefit from subsidies. Even with a 70% subsidy for agricultural mechanisation, marginal farmers could not access the machinery. Brokers acquire agricultural

equipment using farmers' identities and sell it at higher market prices, while farmers fail to receive the subsidy. As a result, we already know where the barriers to reform lie and why cosmetic initiatives are ineffective. We have come to realise that without keeping these varied interest groups under control, reform will not be possible. Therefore, the real task is not making a checklist of what to do, but identifying how to do it.

In the five decades since Bangladesh gained independence, a wave of new technologies has transformed the agricultural landscape. As the population grows, so too does our agricultural production. The push for greater production capacity has led to an increased dependence on chemical fertilisers over organic alternatives. With growing dependence on pesticides, our food is increasingly contaminated by harmful chemicals in the water. Farmers are facing rising health risks from fertilisers and pesticides, while toxic chemicals in food endanger public health nationwide. Seeds are being commercialised, yet escalating prices are burdening farmers with higher production costs. The rising need for irrigation has highlighted the importance of utilising surface water, alleviating the strain on groundwater supplies. Recent advancements in irrigation technology are transforming agricultural practices. The demand for innovative technologies to preserve agricultural products is on the rise.

Despite all these technological advancements, farmers' quality of life has deteriorated even further. Production costs have surged, compelling farmers to sell crops at a loss. Farmers not only battle harsh weather but also suffer from unfair market prices. They face escalating production costs and delayed crop sales, forcing them to rely on high-interest loans to manage expenses.

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KEY POINTS

1. Anchor policy choices in a clear, inclusive development philosophy.
2. Raise farmers' incomes instead of suppressing agricultural wages.
3. Break supply-chain syndicates and curb interest-group capture.
4. Prioritise agriculture-based industries and domestic value addition.
5. Retain domestic capital through coordinated, accountable state action.



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