

Building the Knowledge Economy: Necessary Path to a Sustainable Bangladesh

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Over its 9-year tenure, the current Government of Bangladesh has successfully imprinted certain key facts and figures onto the Bangladeshi mindset. With each day approaching to crucial Parliamentary Elections in 2018/19, leaders of the ruling party rightly point to the elusive strides made in the macroeconomic development of the nation. Ironically however, we pompously promote the idea of a sustainable Bangladesh by basing such an analogy on profitable, yet openly volatile apparel, remittance and agricultural sectors. As such, the true question lies in this: Is Bangladesh collectively promoting a human capital-centred approach to long-term sustainability?

Suffice it to say, whilst the positive assessments of Bangladesh are all true to a large extent, it is primarily a testament to the astute branding that has held together the political base of the Awami League. Bangladesh has undeniably had a growing GDP figure which has catapulted the country towards middle-income status. But at the same time, it is only healthy for the nation to point out the concerning incapacities Bangladesh faces in its socio-economic affairs. And all of these trepidations are interestingly set around the most important resource that Bangladesh has, and in all honesty, can afford to have. People and the skills which they bring, are the prerequisites to a sustainable Bangladesh. As such, promoting and singularly prioritizing unrelenting human capital growth through the initiation of a knowledge economy, is surely the path Bangladesh must take in its quest to be a truly sustainable economy in the long-run.

A knowledge economy determines consumption, production and growth through dependence on the quantity, quality and accessibility of intellectual capital. Whilst intellectual capital consists of various immaterial facets of an economy, including values inherent in people to people associations or intellectual properties, it is in the vicinity of human capital

where developing countries like Bangladesh are required to emphasize. The basic awareness of making our high population a strength, rather than continuously recognizing it as a weakness, sets course for a vibrant education curriculum in the long run. In its simplest understanding, human capital refers to the combined skills, knowledge and intangible assets of individuals that can be used to create further economic value or third-party benefits for those around them. Once we recognize the importance of spotlighting individuals over finding sectors to assimilate their skills in, Bangladesh can initiate the process of accumulating the knowledge economy.

After recognition, the next step is public policy. According to the World Bank, 60% of the population in Bangladesh are situated in rural parts of the country. An extremely low proportion of the country has access to private English medium schools, as such at the very least 85-90% of education services in the country is state-provided. Thereby, the state itself needs a two-pronged approach to education. The first is internal growth within the public-sector education platform. The second is a recognition of stopping the outflow of elite students from the country. While a three-tier division exists within the current education system, the problem lies in the quality of the curricula, more than the system itself. But because of the frail and out-of-date syllabi across all age levels, the system itself demands change.

For state-level education across all age levels, the Government has to consider a revamp, rather than a total repeal and replace approach. It is impractical for a country with 160 million people and weak institutions to completely change its style of education, even if such seems like the optimal solution. Therefore, from within the existing structure of academia, the state has a responsibility to build students from the ground up, through diversifying existing subjects and introducing new programs. For one, the promotion of ICT in classrooms through state-based computer and laptop provisions in public schools, or the very idea of ICT being a viable career direction to work towards, sheds light on the kind of approach needed to create the ultimate knowledge economy, and one must commend the Government for this. On the other hand, Bangladesh complains about the severe fragilities in our national institutions, the wide scale post-graduate youth unemployment and the occupational immobility of its students. How do we get rid of these problems? Well we start from the core foundation. Students aged 16 or above need to get a basic taste of what a working environment is

like. Whether it be public-private partnerships to create volunteering platforms for secondary and higher secondary level students, or introducing summer internship programs across national institutions to generate basic interest in government and governance, it should not be immensely difficult for the Government to enact the required legislations or agendas. After all, as ridiculous as this sounds, almost 80% of our Members of Parliament are businessmen so an amalgamation of public services with private enterprise already exists in the highest echelons of public life. Essentially, by getting our students to work at an earlier age, we should aim towards creating the much-needed balance between simultaneous work and education, rather than one being a substitute for the other.

Basic items such as commencing and encouraging existing subjects such as public policy, civics and social work, whilst at the same time creating avenues for students to acquire practical skills relating to such curricula is equally important. Imagine a student enrolled in geography in the HSC level, getting a 2-month experience to work alongside geographers at the National Meteorological Department, and the resulting skills and knowledge he or she would retain because of such an experience. The ideal roadmap within the public sector thus has three basic steps. The first is introducing and revamping diversified subjects, ranging from the sciences to the arts, starting from primary education to wherever the reach of the state ends. Secondly, it is to introduce openings to build skills and employ education learned in classrooms to a professional setting, that too from an early age. By making internships or volunteering opportunities available across domestic institutions in partnership with private enterprises, we can ensure that ministerial offices, private organizations and bureaucratic hubs are made accessible to students for enhanced knowledge creation and skill sharing. Additionally, structural growth is ensured through a revamped working culture and the instillation of fresh blood in lackluster institutions. Thirdly and most importantly, making stipulated hours of volunteering or internships a mandatory part of the SSC and HSC curricula, will institutionalize the process of investment in human capital. Building the knowledge economy needs an early start, and this means that in a country where the highest proportion of investment in education is state-based, the push must come from within the Government itself. Push our students towards a holistic work environment, by creating a vicinity for students to show off their skills. Let them learn. Let them create. Let them experiment. Let them fail. Let them build themselves. And most importantly, let them spread their skills and create

external benefits for society.

Whilst we have not delved into how this country can retain its so-called elite students, the creation of state-based opportunities for school-goers will push many of the Footsteps and JAAGO volunteers towards participating in the public sector, whilst encouraging those in the private sector to work side-by-side with the Government towards creating even greater ventures for the youth. Mind you, retaining the most privileged in society is a critical demographic requirement. The progressive environment and access to foreign education some of these individuals are exposed to, opens their eyes to a creative, liberal and inclusive society which Bangladesh should dream of achieving. It is a great honor for those studying abroad to have the ability to study in countries like Canada and the USA, and enhance their knowledge, skills and thinking-capacity beyond many of those less fortunate than us. But it also entails a greater responsibility for us. It acts as a constant reminder that those who may very well be more meritorious, are simply being denied access to education because of hefty financial burdens on their families. If the Government in cooperation with our private sector can ensure a push towards creating a holistic work environment and opportunities for such students to show-off their skills, then skill retention and enhanced innovation should, in theory, be a natural byproduct.

Rather than creating industries for the people, the system must create people for the industries. Yes, our RMG sector has given us a flourishing economic status. Yes, our foreign workers in the Middle-East continue to allow us to boast ourselves as a model for development to many countries. But the question is, for how long? Industries stay. Industries go. But people will always be present in Bangladesh. Quality and not the quantity of the workforce will ascertain the kind of country we want to be 20 years down the line.

The state, its aims and its beliefs are an indispensable part of Bangladeshi society. That much is true. But that Sonar Bangla that we all love should be directed towards being openly inclusive, industrially diversified and wholeheartedly people-based. And it is here where we conclude, that the necessary path to a sustainable Bangladesh and a Bangladesh where a versatile education system produces innovative leaders, is through a nationwide emphasis on building the ultimate knowledge economy. The prospects for the students of this country remain untapped and immense. Let us ensure that the greatest resource we have been endowed with is put to good use in the coming years. ■