

BANGLADESH

Inequality Is a Priority for Immediate Action: The global community must affirm its obligation to implement a global partnership to assist countries fighting poverty, inequality and climate change

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Bangladeshi civil society position on the Bangladesh Voluntary National Review Presentation to the UN High Level Political Forum, 17 July 2017

The 2017 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (10-19 July), scheduled to review progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), features Voluntary National Reviews from 44 countries, including Bangladesh. The reviews aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The selected seven goals to be reviewed in depth include SDG 17 on a revitalized global partnership for sustainable development. The other six are SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and adequate nutrition for all, and promote sustainable agriculture; SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; SDG 14: Conserve and sustainable use the oceans, seas and marine resources. SDG 17: Strengthen and enhance the means of implementation and global partnership for sustainable development will be considered in each yearly review.

Bangladesh has taken positive steps to integrate the SDGs into its five-year planning and the government has already initiated a voluntary national review. Thus, it

has shown its commitment to incorporate the priorities of the SDGs into development policies. It is now essential to reaffirm policy priority will be given to combatting poverty, inequality and climate change and the necessary policy framework be set up to enable democratic space, local government and civil society to play a significant role in achieving the goals.

The government has declared an inclusive approach to development so that the poorest and the most vulnerable populations can be integrated into its national development efforts; therefore it has declared a whole society approach, with the engagement of all stakeholders in the process. It essentially requires a clear plan for strengthening democratic institutions and participatory governance to achieve the SDGs in Bangladesh along with the democratic process and the participation of civil society in all levels of implementation, from the national to the grassroots level.

Like the remarkable progress made towards achieving MDGs, SDG integration into national development plans is taking positive steps in this regard. We also should consider, however, that there are growing trends towards “de-globalization of humanitarian and development responsibility”, thereby creating a shrinking trend of official development assistance (ODA). We appreciate the role of Bangladesh as

courageous and commendable in undertaking responsibility towards sustainable development and grassroots participation that must emphasize the role of local government, communities and local civil society in the planning and implementation of the SDGs.

Regional disparities and Inequalities should have priority concern

The Bangladesh policy framework should review the effect of its 'export-led growth' approach to development and must take into account the need for greater equality within regions as well as for distributive justice among different classes of people. The State must ensure greater public investment in essential services like education, health, electricity, water, information communication technologies, agriculture extension services, among others. But in order to meet the conditions of the various International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and to emphasize the export-led growth development model, public investment in those essential services is shrinking. IFIs are pressuring the government for indirect taxes like the Value Added Tax (VAT) which has already been discredited elsewhere as a means of local resource mobilization. So far, several cases of tax dodging by Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) have been leaked. Even some WTO prescriptions are providing greater spaces to the MNCs without considering national interest and capacities, while the WTO is hardly fulfilling its commitment towards the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and other developing countries. The IFIs and the WTO must respect policy spaces for LDCs and developing countries so that national sovereignty in decision-making and the very nature of the State in respect to welfare and redistributive justice can be protected.

Eliminate resource losses from our countries: act against illicit financial flows

Countries like Bangladesh need huge amounts of resources for achieving the SDGs, which globally has been estimated at around US\$ 7 billion annually. Apart from this, Bangladesh has targeted an increase in the tax to GDP ratio of up to 10 to 18 percent in future.

Bangladesh has increased tax collection and is in the process of increasing indirect taxes like VAT which is regressive. Still, the country's direct to indirect tax ratio is around 50 - 50, while in developed countries the percentage of direct taxes is higher. But, Bangladesh is one of the countries in the top list of illicit financial flows, having lost around an estimated US\$ 1 to 1.5 billion each year, largely due to internal corruption. Most of these illicit flows are going towards developed countries and into their tax havens. Recently even some new Asian advanced developing countries are preparing 'race to the bottom' strategies to lure foreign capital, and they are becoming new tax havens.

One country like Bangladesh cannot act alone to stop the illicit financial flows, if there are no international rules in terms of bank and tax transparency, no rules to stop 'race to the bottom' strategies with regard to attracting foreign capital, no rules regarding country-by-country reporting in respect to MNCs. On the one hand, Bangladesh should make a firm commitment to stop corruption and at the same time the international community must agree on a UN Tax Commission that will prepare rules in regard to bank and tax transparency. Developed countries might not need to pour new money into development assistance if they just commit to stopping illicit flows of capital from LDCs and developing countries to their countries. Different studies show that for every US\$ 1 developed countries give as aid, in return they get back US\$ 9 in illicit flows to their countries.

Take a balanced approach in terms of infrastructure for GROWTH and PROTECTION: people need to be protected from the impact of climate change

Bangladesh is one top hit list countries in respect to climate change. Although 175 countries signed on to the Paris Agreement in 2016, the decision by the US administrations to pull out from the Paris Agreement has created a gloomy prospect for the implementation of its commitments. To be sure, the Trump administration does not represent all US people, particularly in terms of action on climate change, as can be seen in the efforts of different US states to

contain carbon emissions. Nevertheless, the decision is a set back and given the nature of the commitments -- Intended Nationally Determined Commitments--it is forecasted that by the end of this century the world might experience an increase of global warming that will be more than 3 degrees Celsius. There will be consequences in terms of climate finance too. Already Bangladesh is facing frequent cyclones, floods, loss of coastal lands due to sea water rising, river erosion, erratic weather, saline water intrusion, and these problems have been compounded by the withdrawal of water by neighbouring countries from common regional rivers. The problem could be minimized if there was infrastructure such as embankments and dikes which could protect the land, especially the coastal lands, along with clean water and sewerage infrastructure in towns, housing for slum dwellers in cities where people from climate hotspots are seeking refuge-- and in future such migration flow is expected to double. But our political leaders give importance primarily to infrastructure which is related only to growth. Growth of course is needed for economic development and employment, but now is the time for planning infrastructure to protect our own people and to make the country climate resilient.

Bangladesh is an innocent victim of climate change: the international community has an obligation to take responsibilities for climate displacement

Different international reports have already mentioned that Bangladesh is one of the hardest hit in terms of the impact of climate change, while it emits negligible amounts of carbon. The impacts described above are already quite dramatic. Bangladesh each year loses 2 to 2.5 percent of GDP due to these climate catastrophes of slow and rapid onset disasters. While this country has been about to reach food self-sufficiency in recent years, due to increased flooding it is again falling back in this regard. The problem is compounded by land loss due to river erosion, saline water intrusion, desertification in the northern part the country, and especially due to water withdrawal in common rivers countries upstream. It is expected that approximately one third of the country will be under water in the next 20 to 50 years, especially

the 24 coastal districts (out of total of 64 districts), resulting in climate displacement of 30 million people, most of whom will seek shelter in urban areas.

Bangladesh has one of the highest levels of people per square kilometers in the world, reaching 1,100 now and which might reach 2,000 by the end of this century—in contrast to 325 to 350 per square kilometer in India and averages 225 to 500 per kilometer in Africa. Climate displacement already has cross border implications. As developed countries are historically responsible for the greatest levels of carbon emissions, these countries are obligated to assist Bangladesh in making the country more climate resilient and take the responsibilities of climate displaced peoples.

Strengthening democratic Institutions should be the key for achieving the SDGs

Democracy and development must go hand in hand, there is no question of one coming first and the other coming later. The history of different nations has shown that, without participatory democracy no development will be sustainable and society will not have sustained peace. So, strengthening democratic institutions must get priority in terms of SDGs planning. In this respect, we underline the need to strengthen the democratic process and institutions in order to create an enabling environment for an inclusive sustainable development process and to enhance participatory governance including spaces for the civil societies at all levels.