

SIX-POINT POLICY PRIORITIES FOR BANGLADESH: 2009–2013

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Introduction

Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI) congratulates the Awami League (AL) on its decisive victory in the recent national elections. We are pleased to see that the leadership is ushering in significant changes in the way the government is run and remain hopeful that these steps will change the lives of the people of Bangladesh in fundamental ways. We also applaud the alignment of AL, BNP and other political parties who have publicly embraced the goal of poverty reduction as one of the major challenges. To achieve the overarching goal of poverty reduction, we offer this policy paper as recommendations on where the new government ought to concentrate its efforts. We believe when changes are made in the suggested six points, Bangladesh will rapidly attain sustainable economic growth and significant social progress.

The six recommendations, outlined below, are designed to help develop a bold and clear vision, formulate detailed policy, and ensure a bright future for Bangladesh:

1. Ensure human rights, establish democratic values and practices, improve governance, and establish rule of law;
2. Generate employment;
3. Achieve adequate and long-term food security;
4. Increase investment in infrastructure and energy;
5. Invest in education and develop human resources; and
6. Manage the nation's health and population

Policy Recommendation #1: Ensure human rights, establish democratic values and practices, improve governance, and establish rule of law:

In order to achieve a prosperous and progressive society, a clear policy statement must emanate from the government that addresses the most fundamental concerns: (i) human rights (ii) democratic values and practices, (iii) governance and (iv) rule of law. No nation can progress without satisfactorily addressing these fundamentals. The Constitution of Bangladesh stipulates that all power of Bangladesh belong to its people. We recommend its full implementation in letter, spirit and practice and urge the elected public representatives to remain pledge-bound to this sacred trust. It is particularly important for the new government to make a clear statement about Bangladesh's stance on its secular values. At the very least, it must emphasize and reiterate its tolerance and respect for "all" faiths and creeds, giving them the assurance that, as citizens, their legitimate rights will have equal protection.

The people of Bangladesh have also been historically deprived of democratic values and practices that have been replaced by despotic and dictatorial regimes. Re-establishment of democratic values must become a priority of the present government: from the party, to the community, to the national level. Lack of democratic values and practices leads to disregard and neglect of the people's wishes. Policies thus need to be articulated to guarantee that: (1) people have the right to question any elected official, (2) such questioning not be considered as "conspiracies," (3) competition to represent the people not be considered a "threat," and (4) freedom of speech would protect one's right to oppose and protest.

Mismanagement and poor governance are also major obstacles to development in Bangladesh. The bureaucracy must be made responsive to the needs and demands of the public. To this end, civil service reforms need to be seriously and vigorously pursued so that the imbalance and inequity between an under-trained, under-compensated, and unmotivated bureaucracy and a smart, well-trained and well-compensated military is mitigated. The present government has a huge opportunity to train and modernize the bureaucracy and public service agencies to carry out their service and regulatory roles to best serve the public. This is important to reshape the belief that the military can run the country better than the bureaucrats and the politicians.

The contributions of the military, however, need to be recognized. They have demonstrated in the past that they are often better at bringing stability to unstable situations. The recent and successful voter drive by the military is also noteworthy. Political leaders, bureaucrats and the military must work together so that their unique strengths are not frittered away in tensions and conflict.

The rule of law has to be established immediately. To plan the transition to a modern economy, policy makers must create a 21st century regulatory framework. No one in Bangladesh must be above the law, and the current government must ensure not only that this becomes reality, but also that the people of the country come to believe that the rule of law has been firmly established. This would be a historic achievement for the government and serve as a linchpin for governance. The government's authority must be exercised legitimately only in accordance with written, publicly disclosed laws that serve the Constitution of the nation. Due process must also be enforced in all legal matters. The rule of law must be established to safeguard against arbitrary governance and to protect the nation from both dictatorship and anarchy.

Crime and corruption must be brought to an end. Reforms must be undertaken to increase transparency in government policy-making, raise public awareness, establish independence of the anti-corruption bureau, strengthen the independence of the judiciary, and build up the civil society. The party in power and the opposition must each set the tone for bipartisanship and respect for the civil society. Finally, appropriate steps must be taken so that the elections and transition of power occur smoothly every five years.

Policy Recommendation #2: Generate Employment

Each year approximately two million additional workers enter the labor force looking for jobs. Even if the population growth rate declines dramatically, large annual additions to the labor force will continue for some years given the dynamic effects of demographic transition. The new administration will be responsible for creating roughly 10 million new jobs during its five years in office. The minority communities, including women, must have the same opportunities in the government's efforts to create jobs.

The collapse in crude oil prices and the abrupt end to the real estate bubble in the oil-producing Middle-East may result in the return of many Bangladeshi workers. As the share of the farm sector in the economy continues to decline, the industrial and service sector must be able to create millions of new jobs to absorb the influx of farm labor. In this backdrop, we recommend that the new government take a number of steps to boost employment.

The administration should create jobs for Bangladeshis by facilitating increased flow of remittances that work their way into creating jobs in the economy. Second, a sophisticated and sustained effort must be launched to substantially increase foreign direct investment in Bangladesh. There is no reason why Bangladesh cannot compete with its Asian neighbors like Vietnam, which have attracted a large pool of global investment, thereby creating millions of jobs. Bangladesh must be seen as an attractive destination for global investors. This can be done by developing the physical and information infrastructure, minimizing bureaucratic malfeasance, and eliminating hurdles such as political interventions and opposition party induced disruptions (hartals). In sum, global investors must be made to feel welcome.

The new government should build on the demonstrated record and potential of micro-finance and other non-traditional strategies popularized by the Grameen Bank, BRAC and other globally recognized NGOs to create small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs, who are self-employed and who can create new jobs in the local economy. A massive investment program strategically implemented to build the national infrastructure for the traditional and the new economy will create millions of new jobs directly, as well as through the multiplier effect.

The absorption of the labor force must be planned in ways so that labor productivity levels evolve through learning and development of technology at a pace that is in keeping with indigenous resource endowments,

not necessarily those of industrialized countries with labor “shortages.” While we can train labor and export them to work in other countries that will have shortages in the future, negotiation of appropriate labor contracts with international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Mode IV) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) deserve the government’s attention. This involves training at the government level so that such negotiation can be conducted effectively with countries seeking to use Bangladeshi labor.

Policy Recommendation #3: Achieve Long-term Food Security

As long as millions of Bangladeshi citizens live on the margin of starvation, any natural disaster or price spike in the international food markets can create a painful food crisis. The recent food crisis (2007–08) was partially caused by disruptive price bubbles in the world rice and grain markets. Self-sufficiency in food production is an important challenge, and a stated goal by the major political parties. We welcome this commitment, particularly in light of the high levels of inflation during 2007–08 that devastated the purchasing power of many ordinary citizens in Bangladesh. The recent reductions in fertilizer and diesel prices reflect the government’s concerns about food security. This will bring welcome relief for farmers producing the next *boro* crop. The recent collapse in the price of crude oil should help maintain the lower price of fertilizer and diesel, two very important ingredients for farmers. The extent of price reductions must, however, account for cross-border informal transactions (smuggling) that could run counter to the goal of benefiting the farmers from such measures.

Food security also has more to do with real incomes (buying power) than the available stock of food. The battle for poverty alleviation is thus the struggle for increasing real incomes for all Bangladeshi citizens. Second, major investments in the agricultural and food market infrastructure — roads, waterways, railways, storage facilities, dredging the rivers and embankments for flood control, etc. — will help the farmers increase production and income, while creating jobs, and help the country reach food self-sufficiency. Bangladeshi farmers must also benefit from the ready availability of credit to invest in modern farm machineries, the availability of flood insurance and futures markets to reduce risks, and from having greater access to market information via the mobile phone and the Internet.

Policy Recommendation #4: Increase Investments in Infrastructure and Energy

Infrastructure

We recommend that the new administration take up the challenge of laying the foundations of a 21st century infrastructure as a top priority. Bangladesh’s physical infrastructure is in serious disrepair and has lagged behind compared to its needs. Thus, patients die on their way to hospitals in the rural areas for lack of decent roads and transportation modes. Food supplies do not move readily from one area to another to match demand and supply, causing temporary price spikes. And the clogged streets in the cities that delay deliveries of key shipments (especially garments) increase the uncertainty and cost of doing business and encumber competitiveness. A bold and ambitious strategy of investment to build the country’s infrastructure will achieve multiple outcomes: generate immediate employment and income to reduce poverty, reverse the impact of the ongoing global economic slowdown, support ready-made garment (RMG) and other export industries, and ultimately create conditions for sustained economic progress.

In the face of a severe global economic slowdown, the time is right to take up this project. Massive and strategically planned investments in physical and digital infrastructure can help Bangladesh leapfrog other nations, and at the same time work as a stimulus package to create jobs necessary to confront the vagaries of global recession. These mega projects should be undertaken with a firm commitment. Each project

— monorail, deep sea mega port, Padma bridge, compact townships, communication systems, dredging of rivers to prevent flooding, others — must be justified on national interests alone. For every project, the question must be asked: How will this impact the poorest households? How will this affect land, water, forest, and other resources? A strong and proactive environment ministry that works in concert with other ministries will be able to ensure that the building of infrastructure is done in a manner that conserves resources while minimizing environmental degradation. Bangladesh's main airport should also be developed into an international hub to compete with other international airports such as Dubai and Bangkok. The government must also take up the challenge of urban planning to reduce congestion and urban sprawl.

Energy

Energy is a prime mover of the national economy. With vibrant sectors such as ready-made garments, pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding, agro-industries, ceramics, raw hides and leather goods, jute, tea, and related products, as well as the service industries, that earn huge foreign exchange and are reliant on consistent supplies of energy, the government must have a viable energy policy that will address short and long term energy needs for the country's operation and development. It is important for the government to articulate how the nations' power needs will be met: How much of it is to be met from internal and external sources? What exact role will be played by the different resources (gas, hydroelectricity, coal, and renewables)? This must be determined from a policy perspective that establishes the allocation of energy to various constituencies (households, industries, and the service sectors) for immediate and long term needs. As capacity is gradually increased, how that capacity will be allocated also needs to be projected for a stable and sustainable growth model of the economy.

It may also be noted that roughly 30% of the population presently has access to power supplies. With the present output of roughly 5,000 MW of electricity, effective power generation by the PDB is about 3900 MW while private power suppliers produce about 1200 MW. With a burgeoning population and the need to extend power to a larger segment of the population, power generation capacity must be increased substantially. We project that a 100% increase in power generation would be immediately absorbed. Reliance on natural gas to generate power must be weighed against alternate sources. For example, coal is abundantly available in the northern districts. While its usage has environmental implications, Bangladesh may need to exploit this resource in the short run, while developing alternative renewable sources for the long term as the technology evolves. Given the resource constraints that the government is likely to face, it should negotiate private investments in the power sector to ramp up quickly. An alternative is to consider public-private partnerships. Also given the adverse environmental impact of coal-generated power, with its huge carbon imprint, the government can bring this to the attention of the developed countries and obtain alternate energy technologies or lower prices for more efficient technologies in return for ensuring a better and more sustainable environment for them.

Reliance on imported oil is not a solution for Bangladesh and hard earned remittances and export dollars should not be spent on unplanned energy expenditure as oil prices rise. Relying on domestic energy will also lower the rate of inflation, the current account deficit, and the continued devaluation of the taka. Energy efficient transportation systems, alternative energy development and use for power and industrialization needs will allow the country to continue its low carbon imprint. Local entrepreneurs should be encouraged to invest in small power plants and renewable energy technologies to increase and diversify the production capacity of the national grid.

Policy Recommendation #5: Invest in education and develop human resources

The education system of Bangladesh must be designed afresh. Foremost is the need for a comprehensive and fresh education policy that envisages the specific needs of Bangladesh for the present, as well as for the future. The government must envision a ground-up new education system that integrates the various, unrelated and incoherent streams of education that exist today. What is needed is a unified system that generates synergy and facilitates easy movement from one stream to another so that it can continue to create the needed human resources to power Bangladesh's growth path without the waste that the current system generates (dropouts, unneeded skills, mismatch with national needs, etc.). The government must be able to clearly state what entities are to be produced by the education system and to what purpose. We reiterate that it is imperative for such system to consider the needs of Bangladesh now and for the next few decades.

The new administration must find resources to invest in education at all levels, aligning this part with the needs of building, supporting and sustaining the nation's infrastructure, industries, and service sectors. The 21st century global economy will increasingly demand knowledge workers. To this end, the government must offer more technical and vocational training opportunities to build people with technical skills — basic machining, operating, repair, computer operations, etc. — with a basic 10th grade education. The government needs to promote and establish programs to train people for retail, transportation, education, and other service sector jobs, since these are the primary areas of employment. By expanding literacy to 100% of the population and ensuring that an increasing number of young people have opportunities for higher education, the nation can succeed in alleviating poverty and achieve other ambitious goals.

The education sector has had chronic problems for long in the following areas: capacity, quality, relevance of curriculum, quality of teachers, accountability, effective assessment tools, research institutions, educational governance, and linkages and partnerships between academia and the market. How the multiple streams of education, beginning from the primary levels, can be unified and coordinated, so that students have clear options as they move from one stage of education to the next, also deserves special attention. Particular attention must be devoted to the assessment system, especially at the SSC and HSC levels where the grading system is too coarse, leading to the same high GPA for very many students. Admission to the next higher level is thus being decided by ad hoc mechanisms such as “first come first served” basis or even by age. The need is a fine-grained norm-referenced grading system.

Another alarming problem is the current capacity of the education system in Bangladesh to accommodate the growing number of willing and capable students. In 2005, out of approximately 73 million students of different age-groups, only 25 million had any education (90% at primary, 44% at secondary, 10% at intermediate college and 1.6% at university levels). During this year, the number of educational institutions was approx: 80,397 (primary), 18,500 (secondary and higher secondary), 3,150 (intermediate, colleges) and 74 (universities). By 2025, the population will grow to a staggering 192.9 million, of which nearly 83 million people, an increase of nearly 10 million additional students, will be of school age. At the current rate of attendance, the nation will have to increase capacity by 15%, i.e., will have to build almost 15,318 additional educational institutions. And, if the demand for education goes up (which is expected to happen), even by adding 100% to capacity, the system will be under tremendous pressure for space, especially at the higher education levels.

The quality of teachers must also be improved by introducing a periodic certification procedure, at least at the primary and secondary levels initially. If the quality of teachers cannot be ensured, how can the nation produce a high quality work force?

The challenges mentioned above involve myriad issues. What is most important is to have a strong political will to create the needed educational infrastructure and opportunities for all who wish to gain access to such opportunities. A 21st century education system is needed as the core foundation from which the nation is to be rebuilt.

Policy Recommendation #6: Manage the Nation's Health and Population

Health

Health and human productivity are intertwined. There is a bi-directional relationship between health and economic development. The positive externalities of keeping a nation's human resources healthy also cannot be emphasized enough. From a policy perspective, the government must be able to envision the desired state of health of the nation reflected in nutrition, water quality, air quality, economic status, mental health, physical health, reduced state of disabilities, etc. What is vitally important is to articulate a pro-poor health strategy where accountability, quality, cost effectiveness, access, and sustainability must be ensured, all focusing on the need for more effective and efficient health programs.

The focus on preventive rather than curative health care must be strengthened. Thus attention must be devoted to various factors connected to health: drinking water, sanitation, and air quality in particular. The crisis facing drinking water is its connection to sanitation, industrial wastes, and natural occurrences like arsenic. Without addressing these sources of health maladies, prevention strategies may be thwarted. Health communication must also play a vital role in strengthening prevention of health problems.

The out-of-pocket (OOP) costs of health care to all, especially the poorer segment of the population, have become outrageously high, while quality is poor, especially for tertiary care. The National Health Accounts study (NHA-2, 2003) estimates household expenditures at Tk. 48.35 billion on health related expenses of which pharmaceutical purchases constitute around 70%, while expenditures on qualified medical providers is only 4.1%. This represents a problem in that the ability to purchase drugs freely can be downright harmful. Legislation must address this problem so that drugs are not available without qualified prescriptions. We also advocate periodic certification of healthcare providers (doctors and nurses in particular) to ensure that the people receive a basic standard of services. In addition, we feel many trained doctors end up in administrative work far removed from the direct provision of health services. We advocate the establishment of health administration training so that a different cadre of health administrators is created for those who want to be administrators. As a result medical doctors, trained with valuable national resources, would not be wasted in administrative positions. Absenteeism of government doctors in the rural centers is a major problem that must be quickly rooted out. Finally, to establish accountability and justice, it must be ensured that medical malpractice, as well as avoidable mistakes can be pursued in the courts of law.

Population

Bangladesh is the 7th largest nation in the world. Estimates are that there are now about 150 million people that is expected to grow to 250 million before it stabilizes. This can be seen as strength if managed properly. Thus, population management (not control) should be given major attention to harness this strength effectively, both for the local economy as well for earning from abroad. On the latter, demographic patterns suggest that many western countries are aging and declining in population size. According to one source, Europe's population could decline by 88 million by 2015. It is easy to surmise the tremendous opportunities that await a skilled workforce to fill the population bust, thereby sending remittances back to Bangladesh that could be multiples of the present \$6.4 billion.

The under-15 population is also roughly 40% of the total population, resulting in the "population momentum" phenomenon driven by the young age-structure of the population. When it comes of age, its needs must be met, not only in education and health, but in employment and various service needs. Scenario analyses with demographic projections must be conducted periodically to ensure future needs and to avoid social instability. We believe close attention to health, education, and employment strategies (discussed earlier) will ameliorate some of the concerns that population momentum portends. For effective management of

this population, it is important to legislate age at marriage and ensure proper education about contraception and economic consequences of unsustainably large family sizes. Service delivery to maintain maternal and child health (MCH), sustain contraceptive prevalence rates (CPR) and decrease total fertility rates (TFR) to replacement levels requires another resolution: the current crisis of whether health and family planning ought to be delivered as one integrated organization or two. This “integration” issue has stalled the efficacy of the program and needs to be resolved quickly, the downside being that population “management” will fail otherwise and population momentum will be adversely impacted. This is an organizational culture problem that cannot be solved by decree but by consensus.

Additional Challenges and Recommendations

While BDI recommends six priority areas for the new administration’s attention, several additional areas must also be addressed:

Improve the Image of Bangladesh in the International Community: Bangladesh should establish a positive image by highlighting its reform and opening up, the growth of the media, cable television, the rapid expansion of the cellular phone network (the subscriber base should cross 50 million by the end of the year), and technological improvements and reforms in the communications and the ICT sectors. Developments in the ship building, pharmaceutical, textile and RMG sectors also need to be projected. It is also important to communicate widely the on-going initiatives to combat corruption, install regulatory reforms and make improvements in the business climate in the country.

Compete in an increasingly competitive global environment: Bangladesh must continue the strategy of emphasizing trade over aid; it should also take advantage of the foreign investment funds flowing into its dynamic regional neighbors, India, Vietnam, and China.

Remittances and Diaspora: It is important to build bridges with the Non-Resident Bangladeshi (NRB) population. NRBs can contribute most significantly to the national economy of Bangladesh, especially in terms of investments. Thus Bangladesh should promote investment facilities for the NRBs. These investments can help increase the foreign reserves of the country, as well as promote its gross productivity. It is highly likely that if the policies are convenient to NRBs, they will be keener to invest in Bangladesh. Moreover, the diaspora population could potentially allow access to the global economic and financial chain, as they may have linkages with foreign trade channels.

Respond to the global economic crisis: Bangladesh must continue the easy money policy until there are clear signs the economic trends have turned positive. Policy makers must also provide a large fiscal stimulus to modernize the nation’s infrastructure and protect the economy from the global economic slowdown.

Reduce regional disparities: To sustain development and gain political support for fundamental reforms, citizens residing in different parts of the country should all experience an improved living standards and quality of life.

Maintain price stability: Since food and energy prices have come down substantially in world markets, the overall inflationary pressures should remain in check in the foreseeable future. The public must be apprised of the global price scenario through media releases.

Improve Bangladesh-India Bilateral Relations: There are still many unresolved issues in the Bangladesh-India bilateral relations. The proper way to mitigate these problems is to pursue an effective and consistent foreign policy. Apart from the regular diplomatic initiatives such as arranging regular summit level meetings, public diplomacy can also play an important role to solve many of these problems. The government of Bangladesh should try to promote public diplomacy; that is, to promote interaction among the people of both the countries.

Strengthen Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Among the most noteworthy achievements of Bangladeshi diplomacy has been the creation of SAARC. As such, our diplomacy should continue focusing on strengthening SAARC as a platform for peace and prosperity in the region. Regional cooperation in the energy sector has become vital for maintaining security and development in the region. A comprehensive and integrated trade facilitation framework needs to be adopted in our foreign policy incorporating: promoting integrated transport infrastructure including transit and transshipment of goods; facilitating and promoting development and modernization of Chittagong and Mongla sea ports as regional hubs; pursuing economic diplomacy to remove non-tariff barriers in trade between Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka; promoting regional customs cooperation; and promoting regional energy cooperation. Bangladesh should also pursue market access in different parts of the world. Through economic diplomacy, Bangladesh should develop and maintain close linkages with the OIC, ASEAN, EU, and the Commonwealth, while strengthening relations with the global powers — the USA, Japan, Britain, Russia, and China.

BDI's priorities and recommendations were reached independently. Some elements may echo ideas being floated by political parties, think tanks or NGOs. To the extent that their ideas also reflect BDI positions, we welcome them; to the extent that they don't, we encourage meaningful dialogue. But, as an institution, BDI remains resolutely non-partisan.

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About Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI)

BDI is a USA-based non-profit organization comprised of independent scholars associated with institutions of higher education in the United States and involved in scholarly exchanges between the United States and Bangladesh through establishing educational programs, publishing an academic journal, sustaining a book publication program to archive indigenous knowledge, and organizing conferences that debate policy prerogatives for Bangladesh and its various sectors. BDI also includes professionals who are involved in supporting social development initiatives in Bangladesh.

BDI was founded in 1988, headquartered in Pennsylvania, USA, to promote the production of high-value-added products such as durable and capital goods in Bangladesh. Equipped with an understanding that Bangladesh's economic development problem lies on the demand side of the equation rather than the supply side, instigated by an anomalous tax structure, BDI has always advocated the establishment of an environment of fair competition in Bangladesh so as to allow the domestic producers a fair chance to market their products and in turn improve their products through research and development (R&D). BDI feels that the establishment of the production of durable and capital goods, supported by domestic R&D, is the preferred way to increase the labor productivity of Bangladeshi citizens to a desired level. More can be learned about BDI on its web site: www.bdiusa.org.

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