

Perspective Planning: Bangladesh Context

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THE necessity and importance of drawing up a time-frame perspective of any activity, small or big, individual or collective, private or public, needs be emphasized in the case of a country, and specially in the case of Bangladesh. The poorest of the poor countries, Bangladesh needs vision, leadership, public awakening and resources too to chart out a sane and pragmatic course of action to progress towards its desired destination.

The country, laden with limited area and unlimited population boom and poverty, has to chart its new course of voyage though a new route, that is, through the private sector and open market.

After the emergence of Bangladesh, as an independent and sovereign state in 1971 it had practically no time to fix up a timeframe Perspective Plan. Instead, the multi-disciplinary experts, both within and outside the country voluntarily assembled together to prepare a monumental and voluminous FFYP (1973-1978) document, within severe time and resource constraints for reconstruction and development of the shattered economy. The Five Year Plan (FYP), based on the inescapable political, social and economic realities of the country, charted a national course for five years and yet provided therein enough guidelines for the coming 10-15 years. The FYP had adjustment cushions for geo-political peaks and pits that were likely to affect government policies and strategies, through the operational planning instrument of Annual Development Programmes (ADP)/Rolling Investment Programmes (RIP) etc.

The country, as other countries in the world, live with and work through political economy i.e. economies influenced by politics whether under the banner of capitalism, socialism, communism or a mixture of them signifying 'State as the Provider.' The banner of capitalism and public sector getting the upper hand remaining the same, the political scene changed in Bangladesh in 1975, and the concept of 'Perspective Planning' (PP) seemed to lose its immediacy, importance and significance.

Still it was recognized on all hands that development is a slow, painful and continuous process and development planning needs a long-term perspective (generally, but not necessarily, for 20 years frame work). In that context the planning Commission issued in 1979 for the first time a short paper entitled 'Preliminary thoughts on a Perspective Plan for Bangladesh (1980-2000)'.

The Planning Commission issued in 1983 revised version entitled 'Thoughts about Perspective Plan (1980-2000)'. To the author's knowledge, both the paper/documents were of very limited circulation.

The 1983 paper tentatively outlined the socio-economic perspectives of the country as:

i) provision of basic needs e.g. staple food, coarse cloth, minimum housing with sanitation and

elementary health care;

ii) literacy for all above the age of 5;

iii) annual 7% sustained economic growth as a necessary condition for a steady reduction of poverty;

iv) employment for all;

v) 100 million population by 2000;

vi) rapid industrial growth based mainly on domestic market and through desired structural changes.

The country has passed through two five year plans (1985-90 and 1990-95) since the perspective plan document of 1983 was out. What is the latest tentative result of the two medium term plan running under the canopy of 1983 perspective plan (1980-2000)? According to one official version of 1994, 'the present socio-economic indicators of the economy are so appalling that there is hardly any prospect for the targets of the perspective plan to be fulfilled.'

That the medium-term plans are failing, on their own counts, to achieve the Perspective Plan objectives and targets do not necessarily invalidate the rationale and necessity of ADP, FYP and PP themselves. Medium term plans need be reviewed occasionally and at least in the mid-year of the period as is the case with ADP every year. So also the case for Perspective Plan in view of global/regional/national happenings having impact on the national life.

Mid-term review of TFYP(1985-90) was done. It has not yet been done for FFYP (1990-95), nor are efforts yet discernible for the preparation of FFYP (1995-2000), the thought this is crucial planning period for the nation in the midst of increasingly intense open market efforts all over the world.

It is also crucial to remember that the Perspective Plan (1980-2000) of 1983 has not yet been revised and published to accommodate new socio-economic happenings and projections thereof in the framework of which FFYP (1995-2000) is to be tentatively firmed up.

Bleak official reference to Perspective Plan (1990-2010) is found

here and there, but is not dealt with elaborately and flexibly anywhere.

The memorandum for the Bangladesh Aid Group 1994-95 seems to have no reference to the national perspective plan whereas the memorandum for 1993-94 gives a 3-page sketchy chapter entitled 'Vision for the Future' which started as follow:

Development is a continuous process and development planning needs long term perspective in Bangladesh, as in the short run one cannot expect dramatic improvement in any sector whether it is self sufficiency in food or removal of illiteracy or alleviation of poverty or empowerment of the poor in the rural society. Again, the vision for the future would have to be based on the current socio-economic realities and hopes and aspirations of the people.

Some other instances (Ref: Bangladesh Observer of 18-03-95) given here are in order to emphasize the rationale and importance of updated and analytical Perspective Plan for Bangladesh:

i) The Communications Minister, while inaugurating the annual convention-94 of R and H Depts. Engineers, asked to formulate perspective plan in consideration of relevant future needs after taking cognizance of drawbacks and shortcomings of the past, monitoring the performances of consultants, maintaining up-to-date records of all sorts of works including culvert construction, repair and carpeting works and informing newspapers of work progress etc.

ii) The Finance Minister while presiding over a high level inter-ministerial meeting to review the proposed national energy policy, in the backdrop of apprehension that gas reserve is likely to be exhausted within the next 25 years, emphasized on acute energy shortage, increasing pressure on the known recoverable gas reserve, alternate use of gas for economically viable sectors/sector, exploration of alternate use of gas for (a) domestic consumption and (b) electricity generation; more private

sector participation for exploration (new gas fields), extraction, development and utilization of gas, viable use possibility of coal for electricity generation etc.

Perusing the past, fathoming the present and forecasting the future — all these politico-socio-economic phenomena are briefly but reasonable reflected in the perspective plan of a country. Time period for such plan or time period for the split-up of such plan into medium-term plans or time period for further split-up of medium-term plans into short-term plans/programmes depend on the realistic and wise decisions of the planners/policy makers.

Whatever be the plan in its timeframe, objectives, strategies, policies and modus operandi in the case of Bangladesh to be specific. Prof. Rehman Sobhan rightly points out that 'Lack of reliable data and robust analysis about the state of the economy is a genuine cause for concern ... One of the most serious problems to be faced in the managing of the Bangladesh economy is the lack of current information on the state of the economy. This informational void on the economy is prejudicial both to improving economic management as well as to the effect functioning of a democratic system.' (Ref: The Financial Express of 10.11.94).

The role, status and efficacy of a Perspective Plan (20-year period as practiced in Bangladesh planning procedure; (1990-2010 ?) comes into sharp focus and in right tune with the illuminating editorial of the Financial Express dated 13.10.94 captioned 'Plans of the Future' which ends with the following observation, 'The government's primary function now is to ensure macro-economic stability and create an investment-friendly atmosphere, and leave the rest to the market forces. In such a scenario the place of five-year plans needs to be evaluated, by which the role of the state too could be more clearly defined.'

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