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## Green technology

Ahmed A. Azad

ON the way to its stated aim of becoming a self sufficient and technologically competent country by 2021 Bangladesh will first need to eliminate poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and massive unemployment. This will be a difficult task in the face of the current international economic downturn, expanding population and decreasing land mass, meagre and dwindling energy resources, and worsening environmental degradation caused by global warming and climate change. In spite of all these obstacles it is possible for Bangladesh to meet its immediate and long-term development objectives. However, no development will be sustainable if it destroys the environment and does not directly benefit the rural and urban poor.

Three groups of workers who have made significant contributions to our relatively healthy economic growth are also those who are among the most economically disadvantaged in our society and are most likely to be affected by the global economic downturn. The demand for cheaper food is driving farmers further into poverty. Increasing numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers are being laid off due to recession and many are being forced to return home.

The RMG export sector remains competitive mainly because labour is paid the lowest wages among all RMG manufacturing countries. These workers, and those who have casual or no employment, need immediate relief through social safety net programs and employment opportunities.

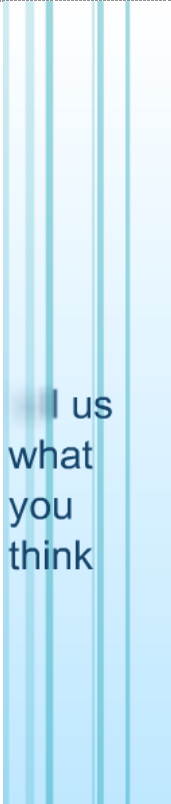
The recently announced stimulus package is welcome and rightly directed mainly to the agricultural and power sectors but, unfortunately, does not address widespread unemployment or provide any relief for migrant workers forced to return home. Job creation initiatives that result in infrastructure development and use environment-friendly technologies will be the most effective recession busters and will also provide sustainable and long-term gains.

Even though the bulk of our people live in rural areas and are employed in the agriculture sector most development activities and associated jobs are concentrated in the major cities. The population of Bangladesh has doubled since independence, and without the untiring efforts of our farmers and agricultural scientists we would have experienced persistent famines. However, the production of high yielding varieties of food crops has resulted in excessive use of chemical fertilisers and chemical pest control agents that cause extensive soil and water pollution. These need to be replaced with environment-friendly alternatives.

There are drought-like conditions in the north and salinity in coastal areas, causing severe loss in food production. This is expected to become more widespread with global warming. These conditions have led to alarming levels of rural poverty and untenable migration to already crowded cities. This needs to be reversed by initiating new development initiatives in rural areas, in mainly agriculture-based industries that use or produce gas or electricity from renewable energy sources.

Bangladesh is experiencing acute electricity shortage. Besides inconvenience to domestic, office and retail activities it also severely disrupts industrial and agricultural production. Industries are only operating at 50% capacity due to constant load-shedding. Most of our electricity is generated from coal-fired and gas-fired generators. These produce greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. The reserves of coal and gas in Bangladesh are very limited and much of it may not even be available for domestic use under agreements signed with multinational companies. It will be a struggle to even power the three new generators that are expected to become operational in the next three years.

The government could consider importing electricity on a temporary basis from neighbouring countries that are producing excess hydroelectricity. This very clean energy could become available on a more permanent basis if agreements could be reached on sharing and use of river waters. Immediate shortfalls in electricity supply are being partially met through diesel-fired generators. This is an inefficient, expensive and polluting exercise.



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Importing liquefied gas or highly polluting coal to meet energy shortages can also not be a permanent solution. A number of environment-friendly measures could be scaled up to relieve pressure on the national electricity grid and on our gas reserves.

Solar energy is abundant, free and non-polluting. Locally assembled solar panels are already being used to produce electricity for personal use. The government could sponsor R&D at universities and the BCSIR to develop more efficient and cost-effective solar panels. Mass production of cheap and efficient solar panels in regional areas would create more jobs, and more extensive use could help to meet most of the lighting needs. Larger solar turbines for electricity generation could also be built for irrigation and commercial needs.

Replacement of urea with bio-fertiliser produced from plant and animal waste and production of biogas from animal waste will reduce pressure on our gas reserves. The production of bio-fertiliser and biogas on a large scale would result in efficient waste management and reduction in environmental pollution. Since the raw material is free and plentiful, and the equipment required can be produced locally and cheaply, the cost of production would be very low.

New chemical and enzymatic methods for digesting cellulose will allow the production of bio-fuels from post-harvest agricultural waste, making this a viable alternative for imported diesel oil. The unique biodiversity of our country could also be exploited as a source of less harmful pest control agents and new drugs. The BCSIR and the university departments of biotechnology, microbiology, chemistry and chemical engineering, in collaboration with NRB renewable energy experts, could help the government to make all the above green technologies economically viable and to scale up the production processes.

The establishment of regional SMEs for the production of environment-friendly bio-fertilisers, biogas, bio-fuels, biological pest control agents, and electricity from solar energy and biogas, would lead to industrialisation in regional areas and employment opportunities for the rural and urban poor. The elected local governments could drive this new green revolution with the support of the department of industry and NGOs already involved in alternative energy projects. These initiatives could be kick-started by allocations from the interim stimulus package, and further developed through public-private partnerships.

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