

SDG Partnerships and Whole-of-Society Engagement: The Case of Bangladesh

Prof. Syed Munir Khasru

Chairman

The Institute for Policy, Advocacy and Governance (IPAG) (corresponding author)

munir.khasru@ipag.org

+88 01711 540 585

14B Chandrashila Suvastu Tower

69/1 Bir Uttam Qazi Nuruzzaman Road

Dhaka 1205, Bangladesh.

Amit Datta Roy, Senior Research Fellow, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG)

Avia Nahreen, Senior Research Associate, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG), Bangladesh

Abstract:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are highly relevant for a developing country like Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been standing in good stead for its excellent progress in the areas of poverty reduction, food security, primary level education, reduced maternal and infant mortality rate etc. under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Buoyed by the successes of the MDGs, Bangladesh became one of the forerunners in embracing the SDGs – otherwise known as the 2030 Global Development Agenda. According to the "SDG Bangladesh Progress Report 2018," the country has exhibited good performance in various aspects including poverty alleviation, gender equality, improved access to sanitation & electricity and annual GDP growth.

Unlike the MDGs, SDGs are much broader development agenda and it covers almost all aspect of development issues. It would be difficult for the public sector alone to achieve its objectives. In preparing its long-term (10 years) and medium-term (5 years) plans, Bangladesh has an established practice of holding wide-ranging consultations across the government, leading economists and academics of public universities, chambers of commerce and industries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), researchers, and development partners.

The GOB has also adopted a "Whole of Society" approach for implementation of the SDGs. As part of this, several consultations on stakeholders' engagement on the SDGs implementation in Bangladesh have been held with representatives from NGOs, CSOs, businesses, development partners, ethnic minorities, professional groups, labour associations, women network and the media. The consultations have sought to raise more awareness, interest and commitment to create more engagement from all stakeholders towards attaining SDGs.

Civil society in Bangladesh has already been an active partner of the government in its development endeavor. The critical role of the private sector in driving economic growth and employment is well proven and the government and the private sector now recognize the crucial role of the private sector in attaining many SDGs. Acknowledging this approach as a prerequisite for Bangladesh for achieving the SDGs, this paper begins by reviewing the current

scenario of “Whole of Society” approach undertaken by Bangladesh and scrutinizes the existing initiatives. It identifies the key non-state actors for this approach in the context of Bangladesh to achieve the SDGs. The research paper then explores the different dimensions of engagement for different stakeholders with the government to attain the SDGs in Bangladesh. Among the stakeholders, this paper gives special attention to the academia and research community and how they can contribute to achieve the SDGs in Bangladesh.

Finally, recommendations are made on how a research initiative can be designed or implemented in Bangladesh so that more effective and innovative solutions can be formulated for attaining the SDGs. This sets of recommendation has been provided taking into account the faster changing social, economic, political, and especially the technological landscape of the world, as well as the country context of Bangladesh.

Introduction:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 interconnected development goals envisioned by the UN to be reached by all its member states by 2030. The goals have 169 targets and the overarching aims of the goals is to reduce poverty, improve the environment and better human rights. Before the SDGs, there were the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which helped countries reduce poverty and improve numerous development indicators like maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate, stunting etc. Unlike the MDGs which were limited in scale and were mostly geared towards developing countries, the SDGs are more comprehensive and universal and are meant for both the developed and the developing world.

What is also unique about these goals is that it is expected that their formulation, adaptation, implementation and evaluation would go through a ‘whole of society’ approach. A whole of society approach means these goals are not just meant to be understood and fulfilled by governments and policymakers. Non-governmental units of societies like the private corporations, non-government organizations, think-tanks, religious organizations, civil society bodies, rights organizations, scientific organizations, and academic institutions all have a significant role to play. To accomplish all the targets under Goal 13 which is ‘To combat climate change’ environmentalists, scientists, rights organizations, multilaterals, local NGOs and local governments would need to work together to both raise money and implement required changes with the raised finance.

Accomplishing the SDGs is a massive task and requires adept policy formulation and implementation. It is also important for each signatory member country to chart a road map and draw out relevant ministries and people who would take lead in bringing all actors under a single platform and motivate and synchronize them to reach the goals. In that regard, Bangladesh has undertaken an exemplary job of identifying ministries and personnel to lead the task of accomplishing the greatest number of targets before 2030. The country has successfully mapped ministries as per relevant SDG, undertaken a rigorous data-gap analysis, created a monitoring and evaluation framework, action plan and financing strategy. It has also created a real-time, web-based SDG tracker. Bangladesh has also, to a certain extent, involved non-state actors and created effective partnerships with them. The country already has a rich history of achieving development goals through multi-stakeholder partnership and is the birthplace of the world’s biggest NGO.

It may also be noted that Bangladesh also has had a satisfying track record in reaching the MDGs and did well in reducing poverty gap ratio, attaining gender parity at primary and secondary education, under-five mortality rate reduction, containing HIV infection with access to antiretroviral drugs, children under five sleeping under insecticide treated bed nets, detection

and cure rate of tuberculosis under directly observed treatment short course and others. Bangladesh was well ahead of some regional neighbors in achieving targets of Universal Primary Education and with respect of share of women in wage employment in the non-agriculture sector, Bangladesh outperformed India, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Bhutan.

This paper hence would analyze in details:

- How the Bangladesh government developed its own SDG ecosystem and how the 'whole of society' approach was undertaken when developing the ecosystem?
- How the non-state actors in Bangladesh with effective partnership with the government would play a crucial role in reaching many of the SDGs on time?
- Some of the existing gaps that remain in effectively pursuing the SDGs and how the academia and the scientific community in Bangladesh can help to bridge that gap?
- Some of the key dimensions that need to be considered before designing a research on SDGs in the context of Bangladesh.

Chapter 1. What is the Whole of Society Approach?

The whole of society approach has today become an oft-repeated and also much abused jargon particularly in the international development sphere. In modern societies today, a host of actors play their designated roles to bring about required social, economic and political changes and also carry on with day to day activities of statecraft. With time, the actors and entities in a society and state have evolved and become numerous. Governments, religious organizations, private and public education institutions, lobbying groups, political parties, cultural groupings, small and large businesses, family units, multilateral institutions, corporations, charitable foundations and regulatory bodies, all have their unique and interrelated roles to play. These social units regularly and continuously engage among each other and keep running the wheels of modern nations.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are a set of 17 interrelated goals envisioned by the United Nations to be reached by all countries by 2030. Standing at 2019 today, the world has another ten years to reach the highest possible number of targets by 2030. It is undeniably a herculean task which can only be achieved through active participation of all relevant actors and institutions in a society. It is not a set of goals to be decided and delivered only by governments of developing countries through consultation and assistance from governments of developed countries. T

The formulation of the SDGs itself took multi-stakeholder and 'whole of society' approach. To finalize the 17 goals, UN conducted a large consultation programme and formed expert groups (Ford 2015). The UN General Assembly formulated a 30-member working group to develop the SDGs (UN n.d.). The range of targets are too wide-ranging to be achieved by government alone. For example, to combat gender inequality, government would require the assistance of religious leaders, local government institutions, and the private sector. The same goes for mitigating climate change consequences. Climate change adaptation change only occur with the help of local NGOs who would effectively be able to both assess local problems and find local solutions through global efforts.

A UNESCAP discussion paper (Cázarez-Grageda 2018), analyses the different roles, incentives and levels of participation of different actors in the review process of SDGs nationwide implementation. The study shows civil society is motivated by having its work recognized and influencing public policy. Incentives in the private sector are driven by the possibility of business cases. Academia too wants opportunities to connect research outputs with policy-making. The

four levels of state and non-state engagement are informative, consultative, empowering and partnerships. For there to be effective engagement there needs to be genuine interest, space for knowledge co-creation and partnership on equal footing.

If we are to provide a definition of ‘the whole of society approach’, WHO has summarized it as “Acknowledge the contribution of and important role played by all relevant stakeholders, including individuals, families and communities, intergovernmental organizations and religious institutions, civil society, academia, the media, voluntary associations and, where and as appropriate, the private sector and industry, in support of national efforts....” (World Health Organization (WHO) 2016).

For Bangladesh, a low-lying deltaic plain located in South Asia, with a population of 24 million (World Bank 2019) people still living below the poverty line, the SDGs are immensely important. The country was a stellar performer on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were a precursor to the SDGs. As per the country’s 2018 SDG Progress, there have been improvements in reducing extreme poverty, increasing social safety nets, and effective spending on health and education. As per the report, Bangladesh is well on track in reaching several SDG targets. In preparing its national SDG Agenda and reviewing its progress, Bangladesh has taken a ‘whole of society’ approach and have engaged multiple stakeholders to reach consensus. In the next chapter after briefly describing the Bangladesh SDG achievement ecosystem, we would look into how Bangladesh has undertaken the ‘whole of society’ approach and if there are any lessons other developing countries can take from Bangladesh’s approach.

Chapter 2. SDG Ecosystem of Bangladesh

Ever since ratifying the SDGs, even within the government, Bangladesh has taken a consultative approach and have incorporated SDG attainment a priority in not just one but most key ministries. Instead of making one person or Ministry, the key focal point for the SDGs, the government established an Inter-Ministerial Committee on SDG Monitoring and Implementation in November 2015. The committee is comprised of 19 senior staff from different ministries and divisions. The General Economics Division acts as the secretariat to coordinate implementation at the policy level. The GED organized a workshop in December 2015 with 69 participants representing 31 ministries and government agencies (Mapping of Ministries by Targets in the implementation of SDGs aligning with 7th Five Year Plan (2016-20) 2016). To assess the position where Bangladesh stands in each of the 169 indicators, data is of utmost importance. To assess if adequate data is available, Bangladesh’s Planning Commission conducted a review which revealed that Bangladesh has data for 70 indicators and partially available data for 108 indicators. This review was conducted with the help of the local government institutions.

Bangladesh today is an exemplary country in terms of incorporating SDG milestones in their major development plans. In both the incorporation and review process, Bangladesh has used nationwide ‘whole of society’ approach to ensure that no one is left behind and that the development agenda is not partisan. Bangladesh aims to achieve the SDGs through three Five Year Plans (FYP), the 7th FYP (2016-2020) 8 FYP (2021-2025) and 9th FYP (2026-2030). Outside of the SDGs, in formulating its national five-year development plans, it has used country-wide consultations with government representatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), researchers, practitioners of human rights activities, and development partners. A panel of eminent and relevant personalities was also formed by the Planning Commission of the Bangladeshi government to reflect take their advice and recommendation in key development plans. Role of private sector in particular has become more prominent in Bangladesh today and they provide critical health, communication and financial services to people of all social and

economic strata. Hence, they too were critically involved in formulation of all key development plans. (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2017).

Given the importance and priority of the task, 'SDGs Implementation and Monitoring Committee' has been formed at the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office to facilitate and implement of the SDGs (Moinuddin 2018). For each of the 169 SDG targets, a lead ministry, associate ministry, actions to achieve the SDG targets during 7th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) and list of existing policy instrument has been identified, although information is not available for all targets. An SDG Tracker has also been created by the government which is essentially a website which updates how far Bangladesh has come in achieving each of the 17 SDGs. The website is open to all and is an example of undertaking a 'whole of society' where information regarding SDGs in real is not available for relevant government employees but for all to see. In 2016 the General Economics Division (GED) with the technical and financial assistance of Support to Sustainable and Inclusive Planning (SSIP) Project organized an Inter-ministerial Consultation Workshop on 'Designing a SDGs Monitoring Framework (UNDP 2017)'

Chapter 3. Mode of engagement with different stakeholders

A number of civil society organizations today have incorporated their existing work and have taken up new assignments and inquiries dealing with the SDGs. The Citizen's Platform for the SDGs is an independent and voluntary civil society platform consisting of a core group of advisors made up of eminent personalities and 104 organizations. The aims of the platform is to independently track the progress of SDG delivery; advocate for policy formulation to better reach the SDGs, bring transparency in the implementation process; and, facilitate exchange of information and coordination among all those working on the SDGs in Bangladesh (Citizen's Platform for SDGs n.d.). The Institute for Policy, Advocacy and Governance (IPAG) in Bangladesh have been assigned to become the Bangladesh co-host for the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). As the co-host, IPAG would formulate a network of universities, chamber bodies and NGOs working on SDG in Bangladesh so that they can undertake research and advocacy collaboratively under a single platform.

Given the substantial role private sector is to play in ensuring the SDGs, the government, relevant UN agencies met with the private sector by arranging a consultation session titled 'Role of the Private Sector in Facilitating the SDGs.' As per the SDG Financing Strategy of Bangladesh, the government expects the private sector, which now make up substantial portion of the economy, to contribute large amounts to fill the financing gap. As per the 'SDGs Financing Strategy' in the 7th FYP, which is central to achieving SDGs, private sector is expected to finance 77.3% of the outlays. Beyond the 7th FYP, in total private sector would bear between 37% to 46% of the total additional SDG costs during FY 2017 and FY 2030. (General Economics Division, Planning Commission 2017). The strategy also highlights the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs), however absence of well-thought out legal framework, lack of competent professionals and lack of PPP capacities in most Ministries have so far prevented PPPs from making substantial contributions. In addition to the private sector, NGOs too have been identified as potential source of financing and they have been estimated to contribute around 4% of the cost.

Bangladesh is considered an 'NGO success story.' After its independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh was a war-torn country of limited resources. Its government was heavily limited and was not to fully deliver public services like health, education, and disaster relief. Both local and international NGOs have helped Bangladesh increase literacy, better manage natural disasters, empower women, increase life expectancy, reduce maternal mortality, curb

population growth and supply door to door vital healthcare services. Today NGOs are also helping rural households to adapt green technology like solar power making Bangladesh the country to have the highest rate of household to install and use solar power. NGOs have played a pivotal role in ensuring Bangladesh reach a large number of MDGs and they will also play a major role in ensuring the country reaches the maximum possible SDG targets (Khan 2019).

Chapter 4. Research and Data to support SDG agenda for Bangladesh

It is important to establish Multi Stakeholder Partnership (MSP) for achieving the SDGs for Bangladesh. The government, development partners, NGOs, and private sector have strong role to play to achieve the Vision 2030. As written in Chapter 2, that the Government of Bangladesh has made good progress in terms of creating a comprehensive knowledge base on all the 17 SDGs. However, there is no specific initiative to conduct research on all the targets. Fact based evidences are required to support the policy makers for formulating effective policies.

Bangladesh made remarkably well in terms of achieving the MDGs and doing satisfactory progress in achieving the SDG targets, however, the research infrastructure in the country is poor and inadequate. As per the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) research, Bangladesh was placed 116th out of 129 countries in the Global Innovation Index 2019 ranking, which is unchanged from last year's ranking. Bangladesh's performance in the research indicator was even poor, placed 127th among the 129th countries the research has covered.

Bangladesh now has 145 registered universities all over the country. More than 100,000 students are enrolled and around 30,000 faculties are providing teaching in those universities (BANBEIS Bangladesh 2018). Although the research infrastructure is very poor for all these universities but this network of universities can be leveraged to initiate research to support SDG agenda in Bangladesh. SDSN is a global network of universities, research centers, UN agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector, and civil society. Through the network of SDSN, global knowledge and expertise can be mobilized to promote implementable solutions for sustainable development in Bangladesh. SDSN global network can be used to develop research capacity of the universities from Bangladesh. SDSN Bangladesh chapter already started to empanel reputed universities from Bangladesh to form a network. This network can be used to identify problem, select research topic, fund research, publish, and share with local and global audiences.

Chapter 5. Recommendation for Future Research

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Bangladesh has been making decent progress in terms of achieving the Vision 2030. However, achieving the 17 goals and the targets will be a paramount task for Bangladesh. The whole-society approach can be adopted to make this ambitious vision a reality. SDSN can integrate the academia and research community to the SDG attainment process. The following are some of the recommendations for future research:

1. Inclusivity

Income disparity has been growing in Bangladesh. An Oxfam study found that 5% of the population in Bangladesh has more than 95% of wealth which indicates acute economic disparity in the country. Gender disparity is also widely prevalent in Bangladesh. Social inclusion has become a problem because of Rohingya issue. Moving ahead, the Inclusivity dimension in whatever form - economic, social, gender, technological - needs to be internalized in the research and intervention design process.

2. Sustainability

It is important to ensure sustainability of the research programs/projects, especially those with proven track-record of having impactful outputs. While need and importance of supporting core research remains as valid as before, time has come to recognize the business-knowledge model that supports & promotes initiatives that has a built-in sustainability mechanism by balancing social services with commercial viability.

3. Cross-Functionality

It is important to explore multi dimensionality of research areas like SDGs to understand the true nature of the problem which among others include political, social, economic, environmental, and technological aspects. Modern era challenges are multi-functional in nature with cross-cutting research areas that often influence each other. It is important that research projects adequately address cross functional interventions to ensure maximum value addition from the resources being made available for such purposes.

4. Technology Connect & Disruptions

Digitalization, social media, and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has started impacting business, societies, and even basic human interactions. Any initiative, whether it is research or social intervention, needs to be compliant with the changing technological landscape. Research finds that between 75 million to 375 million (15% of the total workforce) people around the world may need to change occupational categories and acquire new skill by 2030 for surviving. Emerging technologies, If not addressed properly, the existing digital divide and growing technological disruptions will further exacerbate the existing social and income inequality.

Frontier shaping technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics, Automation, Distributed Ledger etc., are blending the boundaries among digital, physical, and biological spheres. These advanced technologies can be used for achieving Vision 2030 for a country like Bangladesh. If used properly, technology can help to reduce inequality and eliminate poverty.

5. Impact Research

Impact Research can be an innovative model for financing future research programs which is based around the idea of Impact Investment. The idea of Impact Investment can be replicated to knowledge industry and Impact Research can be the new big thing. The Value-for-Money will be in the core of the Impact Research which will ensure maximum impacts generated from the investment in research. Aid fund has been shrinking globally for the last couple of years as too many stakeholders are competing for limited resources. For making the best use of resources, it is important to prioritize ground level research that can influence policy instruments and implementation mechanisms to make meaningful and positive differences to human lives. In a fast-moving world where technology is outpacing regulations, connectivity is changing the rules of engagement, and knowledge is being redefined by interest & impact as opposed to availability & need, "Impact" is of critical essence in evaluating the merit of the future research proposals.

Chapter 6: Expected impacts

The whole-society approach can integrate stakeholders from different interest groups in a functioning platform where each of the parties will play their distinctive role and at the same time will work together to complement each other. A synergistic approach will be critical to achieve the targets for Bangladesh.

In the short-run, the focus should be on developing policies and strategies keeping the focus on sustainable development. It is not possible to achieve the goals without effective, comprehensive, and inclusive policies. Bangladesh can form strategic relationship with other developing and developed countries to understand how they are tackling the development challenges. The research community can play a vital role here to explore development conducive policies, compare those with other countries from similar socio-economic context, and advocate those policies to the policy makers and other stakeholders from Bangladesh. Research community, under the SDSN Bangladesh chapter, can collaborate with reputed universities and research institutes from around the globe to enhance their capacity and capability on research.

The mid-term target should be to establish several Center-of-Excellence (COE) in the country. These COEs will host focused research on different sustainable goals. Along with the academia and research community, active participation will be there from the private sector as well. Researchers, consultants, academics from the country and abroad can collaborate in these centers to work on different development challenges. Role of these COEs will be to explore the achievements on all the 17 SDGs including the results achieved, the challenges, and what needs to be done to achieve the targets by 2030. If implemented properly, these COEs can help other LDCs and developing countries to attain their targets.

In the longer term, Bangladesh will face several major barriers in the way of achieving the SDGs. The first one is to ensure the sustainability of the results those will be achieved by then. Bangladesh is one of most vulnerable countries in the world due to the climate change related effects. It will be a paramount task for Bangladesh to protect the infrastructure and environment from climate change induced externalities. The second major challenge is to tackle the new wave of changes happening because of Fourth Industrial Revolution (FIR). FIR is disrupting many well-established systems and processes. By the end of the next decade, FIR is expected to impact every segment of human lives. It will be a challenge for the country to cope up with the changing landscape happening due to the FIR. Tailor-made research is required for Bangladesh to understand true nature of these challenges and to explore the solutions as well. The whole-society approach can play a vital role here providing fact-based evidences to different stakeholders about these mentioned challenges.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Way Forward.

It is almost 4 years since the leaders of the states around the world adopted SDGs and Vision 2030. Being a signatory from the very beginning, Bangladesh is showing strong commitment to achieve the targets. However, multi-stakeholder partnership is in the heart of the Vision 2030. Without integrating the whole society to the development agenda, it will not be possible to achieve the goals in a resource constrained country like Bangladesh. By facilitating MSP, Bangladesh can expect to achieve SDG by 2030.

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