

National Social Security Strategy and Universal National Pension System in Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) has been approved by Government of Bangladesh by putting priority to the social and economic protection of the extreme poor of the society. The Social Protection Programme, which started after 1990, has seen considerable progress in terms of bringing the extreme poor of the society under its wider coverage and gradual increase in the allocation of resources from national budget. According to government calculations, the allocation is not less than 2.02 per cent of the total GDP and constitutes 12% of the public expenditure. The latest government figures claim that the percentage of the poor and extreme poor people in the country has been reduced to 24.4% and 12.9% respectively (GOB-GED, 2015). It is not yet clear whether the Social Security Policy has been finalised based on the basis of newly accepted NSSS Paper. As a result, rooms are still left for affirmative manoeuvring. It is obvious that finalisation and the implementation of the policy are time-consuming, but there is no reason to believe that it is far off. But the directions for financing the whole scheme and implementation process of the policy are still unclear. It is expected that as a country that is progressing towards the status of a 'middle-income' country and constitutionally promises to be a 'Welfare state' (GOB (1), 2011: Article, 15 of the Constitution) the proper implementation of the national Social Security Policy will be deemed to be one of the essential conditions. Keeping that in mind, the aim of this essay is to present some recommendations on the formulation of a forward looking National Social Security Strategy or the Social Security Policy conducive for a nascent welfare state aspiring to achieve middle income country's economic status.

Though there is ample scope to speak on the social security or safety net programs in effect, this discussion will only touch on the context of the existing Social Safety Net Program issues without going into details. The main discussion will be devoted on the implementation of the proposed 'Universal National Pension System' and the rationale and argument for it. The issues discussed in the paper are divided into two. The first part deals with the existing NSS programme and in the second part discusses the issues of proposed 'pension scheme' and alternative resource avenues by mobilising 'Zakat Fund' (the compulsory contributions by a devout Muslim to the poor) for pro-poor safety net have been elaborated. Discussion on a 'life-cycle oriented social security' and old age pension issues received special attention in the recently accepted Social Security Strategy. But the discussion has not been followed or complemented with appropriate policy commitment. A roadmap of the national pension policy could have been incorporated in the strategy paper-that has not been done with a clear programme mapping. But useful information and data needed to set up a system of national citizen pension has found prominence in the strategy paper. The objective of the current discussion will be towards starting a fruitful conversation on setting up of a pension system for all citizens above a certain age in addition to the government servants and the poorest in the society. The introduction of a universal and comprehensive pension system for all senior citizens would be a way forward in fulfilling the constitutional obligation of seeing Bangladesh as a 'welfare state'

PART-1

Reorganisation of the existing social security programme

The social security programmes that are presently in effect are stuck in conventional mire. These programmes are completely bereft of any creativity and are in the grips of corruption and mismanagement. It would be wasteful and meaningless to carry on these programmes in the same manner without initiating major changes to its present conditions. Though the social safety net programmes in this country had gained some momentum after 1990, the history of social security in the form of aid at the time of disaster, special works programmes and food security is not new in this country. But the new phase of this programme as part of sustainable poverty reduction and development at the grassroots has yet to get a powerful and transparent organisational level and structure. At present, the budget for social security and safety net is allocated for 145 programs that are under 23 ministries and departments. This allocated amount in the national budget 2015-16 is about TK. 30,000 crores and it is claimed that the programs will benefit 32 percent of the intended population (GOB-GED, 2015 and MJF, 2015). Both government and non-government evaluations have already pointed out many shortcomings and lapses. Previously in an evaluation of 30 social security programs, which claimed to have incorporated 24.5% of the intended population. It was found that 18% of those were not even qualified for inclusion in the program (MJF, 2015). They were incorporated through various means of corruption and committing irregularities. Analysis of the expenses of the pension of government servants and 5 life-cycle based programs which are supposed to hand over cash funded from the national treasury under the NSS and safety net shows that in the 2015-16 budget, the estimated expense towards covering 35.7 million beneficiaries will be 345 billion taka. Of this 212 billion will be distributed to those directly benefited. The remaining 133 billion will go towards the expenses in the implementation and administration of the programmes, such a high administrative expense is not acceptable by any standards (GOB (3), 2015). Besides, the corruption, wastage, political abuse and workplace indiscipline prevalent in the social security program under the food assisted development programmes are impediments to quality control and achieving proper and definite goals. So, for the programme to achieve definite goals, several steps need to be taken to rid it of three negative factors of the prevalent clique. One: stopping the illegal and unjust practice of political patronage in delivering safety net; two: minimising excessive relief orientation and transforming those into economically sustainable development programmes and three: stopping indifference, benign tolerance of irregularities, and negligence by the local administration and political leaders towards the prevailing corruption and mismanagement and establishing a strict, transparent and efficient management system. In spite of various limitations so far mentioned, the experiences Bangladesh cumulatively gained are not negligible. All these experiences can lead to redesign the programmes for greater good of the society in an efficient way. The study attempts to formulate few recommendations on the basis of wider discussion on the issue in various civil society forums some of those are furnished underneath may be considered for reorganising the system towards eradication of poverty and a sound social protection system to function with efficiency and economy.

1. It should be seriously reviewed whether the existing 145 programs under 23 ministries and departments can be brought under one single 'lead ministry and a maximum of six administrative ministries. In this case, the leading ministry could be that of Finance,

PART-2

National Pension or State Pension for Senior Citizens

In this country only government service holders- both civil and military are entitled to retirement pension. In recent times, service holders of universities and other autonomous bodies have been added alongside government service holders to the pension system. Therefore, people above the age of 60 years who have held a government job for 25 years receive a pension at a rate based on their last drawn salary amount. They can receive this pension at one go or monthly akin to a salary. After the death of the service holder, their husband/wife and children are entitled to the same. There are private funds and gratuity schemes for the corporate sector or non-government organisations. As per condition of jobs, they receive the benefits after they leave or retire from the job (Myian, Undated).

But there are many in the country who contribute to the development of the society, state and the country during their working life but are not included in the pension system or retirement benefit schemes. At the end of their active lifetime, they cannot live a secure, certain and normal life. There are those among them who regularly paid all taxes when they were fit for work and earned above the tax paying income ceiling. For 10-30 years they have to pay income taxes to the government. Then there are also those who contributed to the development and progress of the country but their earnings were not within the income-tax range. But they have to lead an unbearable life after they no longer have the capability to continue work and earn. The average life expectancy of a Bangladeshi is now 70 years (GOB (2),2015). After reaching the age of 60, if they do not have adequate savings, all senior citizens have to be dependent on the mercy and patronage of others. There is a general trend and tendency to save money by all means in right and wrong ways while in work, so that one does not have to depend on others in their old age. The state can start a system of cash pension after certain age and ensure health care for all the senior citizens. These two support systems can be given a universal form and structure. A mixed system of insurance and pension can also be established by having arrangement with employers and credible financial institutions.

Universal structure: The structure can be formed through the assimilation of the income tax and the pension system. There can be a social security registration for all working people in the country employed in government-non-government, formal-informal, independent, self-employed and people in their own vocations and businesses. This could be connected to the national identification system (ID Card) that is in effect now. That is, everyone will also have an income tax registration connected to his/her national identification registration and that may also subsequently provide a 'Social Security' number. This can be one of the primary bases of the citizen pension and income taxpaying citizens could be registered first. A certain sum will be contributed to the pension fund on behalf of every income tax paying citizen from the amount of tax they pay. In this way, a close connection can be built between the retirement pension and the income tax. This means, senior citizens will be entitled to a general amount (say 10000 taka per month for every one over 60/62 years of age) but the amount will be increased further based on the proportion of income tax paid by them during their active and working life.

At present, the principal amount of pension for government employees is 90% of the net salary drawn and total amount accumulated will be equal to the amount multiplied by TK 230. The difference of amount among the pensioners will be determined on the last salary drawn by them and it is going to create a difference in the total pension amount among different categories of employees. In this case of newly suggested national pension system, it is not the earning or salary

that will create the difference in the total amount of retirement pension benefit, but the amount of income tax paid to the government during the active working life as well as contribution to other insurance schemes. As a large number do not belong to the salaried service or employment.

Many people in the country working as doctors, consultants, lawyers, NGO workers, small businessmen, those employed in the services and working independently pay taxes then again and a large number do not. Then there are also some who pay a nominal amount just to dodge the punishment under law or just to register them as tax payers. In reality, those who pay taxes end up being on the losing side in the culture of our society. Because, those who evade the taxes, do have remote possibility for punishment. Those who do pay taxes and within the tax net are not benefitted in any way for paying taxes rather they are faced with many odds under the different rules and regulations. They do not get any direct benefits from the state in exchange for the taxes they pay. They are not entitled to any earmarked or special healthcare for themselves or their family, their children's education, preference in any public utility or recognition from the state. After retirement, they are not entitled to claim any social security either. They have to depend on their children or their savings if they have any. From the tension about uncertain future, a tendency to accumulate wealth through legal and illegal means is rampant and aggressive. If a system of citizen pension in recognition of taxes and other contributions were there, a tax paying culture would have been taken firm root also ensure a life free of tension and worry for the law abiding citizen.

Therefore, a system of universal pension for all, side by side with the government employees can be created by combining income tax payment and retirement pension scheme for all. A similar system has developed into a mature and organised form in West European and Scandinavian countries through changes and reforms over a period of hundred years since the 1920s (Dixson and Scheurell, 2002).

Funding the pension system: A certain portion of the tax amount payable to the government in any given year could be saved in the state pension fund. The state can invest this money in different profitable financial programmes. In this way, a handsome fund could be accumulated by the state for meaningful investment. The number for tax payer citizens will rise rapidly in the country. On the other hand, social insecurity and uncertainty will decrease. A self-respecting society will be created. Every citizen will be brought under the working network after finishing his or her education. They will also be included in the social security and retirement pension system at the same time. The state may be able to receive taxes from the working citizens at least for 40 years and have to pay them retirement pensions for a maximum of 10-15 years.

Pension through 'Social insurance' scheme can also be started through a state guarantee to bring in people under a pension/insurance scheme on their own voluntary contributions. Any person involved in any work can receive pension at a definite rate based on the premium after the age of 60 being member of the scheme. Husband/wife or underage children can also be made part of the pension scheme.

At Present, The biggest portion of government expenses goes towards the wages, allowances, pension and gratuity for civil and military personnel. The total number of government employees-both military and civilian-is not more than 2 million in the country. Analysing the 2015-16 national Budget Document (Statement-4, combined non-development expenditures fund) and report 6 (non-development expenditures-ministries and departments), the allocated amount for civilian employees is 45,365 crore 92 lakh 29 thousand taka. If the pensions and gratuity amount of 11,584 crore 37 lakh 56 thousand taka allocated in 2015-16 budget is added, the amount stands at 56,940

crore 85 lakh 50 thousand taka. The greater portion of taka 17,961 crore 91 lakh 50 thousand allocated for the armed forces is also that of wages, allowances, pensions and gratuity GOB (4),2015).

It is said that 3.1 million out of total 160 million people in the country have tax (TIN) registration. Of this, only 1.1 million actually pay taxes (Daily Prothom Alo-September 30,2015). Till last year, government employees did not have to pay taxes on their salary incomes-that has been changed recently. Now, they too have to pay taxes on their salary incomes. The wages and allowance of ministers and MPS are exempted from paying taxes for some special reasons. The National Board of Revenue has set a goal of collecting taxes of taka 64,971 crore on the income and profit of individuals and establishments. The target for collection of Value Added Tax (VAT) is 64.262 crore 91 lakh taka. The first category of tax is collected from individuals and organisations directly and the second category tax is on everyone irrespective of rich and poor. In total the government hopes to collect 2, 08,443 crore 29 lakh 96 thousand taka from the NBR taxes, non-NBR source taxes and non-tax incomes of which 74.902 crore 76 lakh 52 thousand will be spent on government employees belong to civil and military services (GOB (4),2015). This expenditure structure of the government is not logical. The common people of the country do not pay different category of taxes for supporting the government and government employees only. If the services and benefits a citizen can claim in lieu of taxes and other obligations they fulfil are taken into consideration, then a massive change to the current structure will be needed. In future, the primary consideration for pension should not only be the government service-the proper payment of tax as a civic duty needs to be given the top most priority along with government service. Therefore, as **the first step towards establishing a universal citizen tax, a proper idea needs to be developed to bring all tax payers under the retirement pension system.** The citizen pension system needs to be strengthened through reforms in other safety net and social security programmes as a middle-income welfare state. There is no alternative but to go for universalisation of state benefit as far as possible. Only 1-2% of the tax paid by individuals can be set aside for creating the pension fund from the next financial year. A pension system for those above 60 who have paid taxes regularly in the preceding 10 years can be started from 2018-19. This is how it can begin and by 2020 the system can be finalised for fuller implementation.

At the same time, Work should also begin to launch a single national social security and social insurance system for income tax payers first and gradually a national insurance scheme and national citizen pension in accordance with the national social security policy can be started by formulating a road map. The government needs to formulate a transparent and feasible road map to this end and create an independent commission to monitor and assist in the process of formulation and implementation of the policy. The permanent pay commission and social security and pension commission can be integrated into a single entity for initiating the reform.

Alternative funding for the social security programs for the extreme poor

At present, taka 30,000 crore has been allocated for the social safety net system in exchange for cash and food grains. If other social security program, especially the national pension system is started, then a part of the tax revenue will be shifted for that from the existing safety net. This might apparently pose a threat for the current programs or create an extra pressure on the budget, but in reality, it is not however, this can be combated in two ways. One: if the universal pension system is started in the country, then the separate allowance for senior citizens as well as the pension fund for government employees could be merged with National Pension system. Two: Separate allocation

for the funding of social security of the extreme poor might become negligible and smaller. Three: The money for supporting extreme poor can be collected from other alternative sources with proper incentives.

A large portion of relatively affluent citizen of the country pay Zakat as part of their religious obligation according to shariah dictum. More people in this country pay zakat than those who pay income taxes. There is no registration for those who pay Zakat and the Zakat system is not connected with any government programme. At present, a nominal rebate is given for the amount of Zakat paid to the fund of the Islamic Foundation. If the government allow further incentives in this case, the society and the Zakat payers will both be benefited and encouraged. The state may find a new avenue with an alternative funding source for the social safety net programme of the extreme poor by utilising the social capital and people will be encouraged voluntarily to donate the Zakat amount to the GOB fund.

A big portion of those who pay taxes at present, also contribute Zakat due to religious reasons. Zakat under the prevailing situation is not delivered in an organised and Islamic way; the society is not fully benefited from it as expected. On the other hand, it creates an additional anxiety for taxpayers. There are doubts about giving Zakat at the rate of 2.5% of savings on top of paying a considerable sum for taxes. This brings a sense of hesitation and guilt both in many minds. There are conflicted between the punishment for not paying taxes and Allah's wrath for not honouring the fifth pillar of Islam. If the state takes responsibility, a citizen can be relieved of both-his civic duty and his religious obligation. A system can be created by the social security programmes of the extreme poor, thus relieving pressure form the national budget. On the other hand, the Zakat payers will be satisfied for having done their religious obligations.

A simple recommendation for the matter can be as follows. Every TIN registered taxpayer will indicate/declare the amount of money s/he wants to contribute to the National Zakat fund on the income tax return forms. The Zakat amount will also be deposited with income tax separately. The government will ensure that the amount indicated by the taxpayer will be deposited in the Zakat fund under the TIN holder's name. In this way, those who pay taxes and contribute zakat regularly will get the opportunity-if s/he pays half of the 2.5% Zakat from his own money, then the government will pay the rest from the tax paid by him. Only condition is that the Zakat contributor has to be a taxpayer and the Zakat money does not exceed 20% of the tax amount. I am sure this combined fund will not be less, if not more, than the money allocated for safety net program every year. There should not be any other separate system of tax rebates (for paying Zakat to state) as it exists now.

To this end, the government can formulate the "national Zakat Collection and Utilization Policy" The National Board of Revenue can transfer the money collected as Zakat contributions to GOB fund. A combined system can be created by the joint efforts of the Religious Affairs Ministry and the Social Security implementation ministry to determine how the money could be collected and utilised.

CONCLUSION

The reason behind this discussion is to create awareness about the importance of a national pension policy for the benefit of the society and economy of Bangladesh as a sustainable and forward-looking initiative. If we think of the social security issue separately, new impediments of funding and organisation may arise. So, the current income tax, newly proposed universal pension system and subsequently issue of proposed Zakat collection and its utilisation can be incorporated as part of the overall social security policy. The issue needs to be seen from the constitutional guarantee to ensure economic and social security of all citizens-not only government employees, but a system based on the principles of a caring society and discharge of civic duties-especially lawful payment of taxes. If the system is implemented, the scope of the country's income tax collection will rapidly increase. The general people will be relieved of worry and anxiety of sustenance of livelihood in an old age. This will bring peace and stability to social life.

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