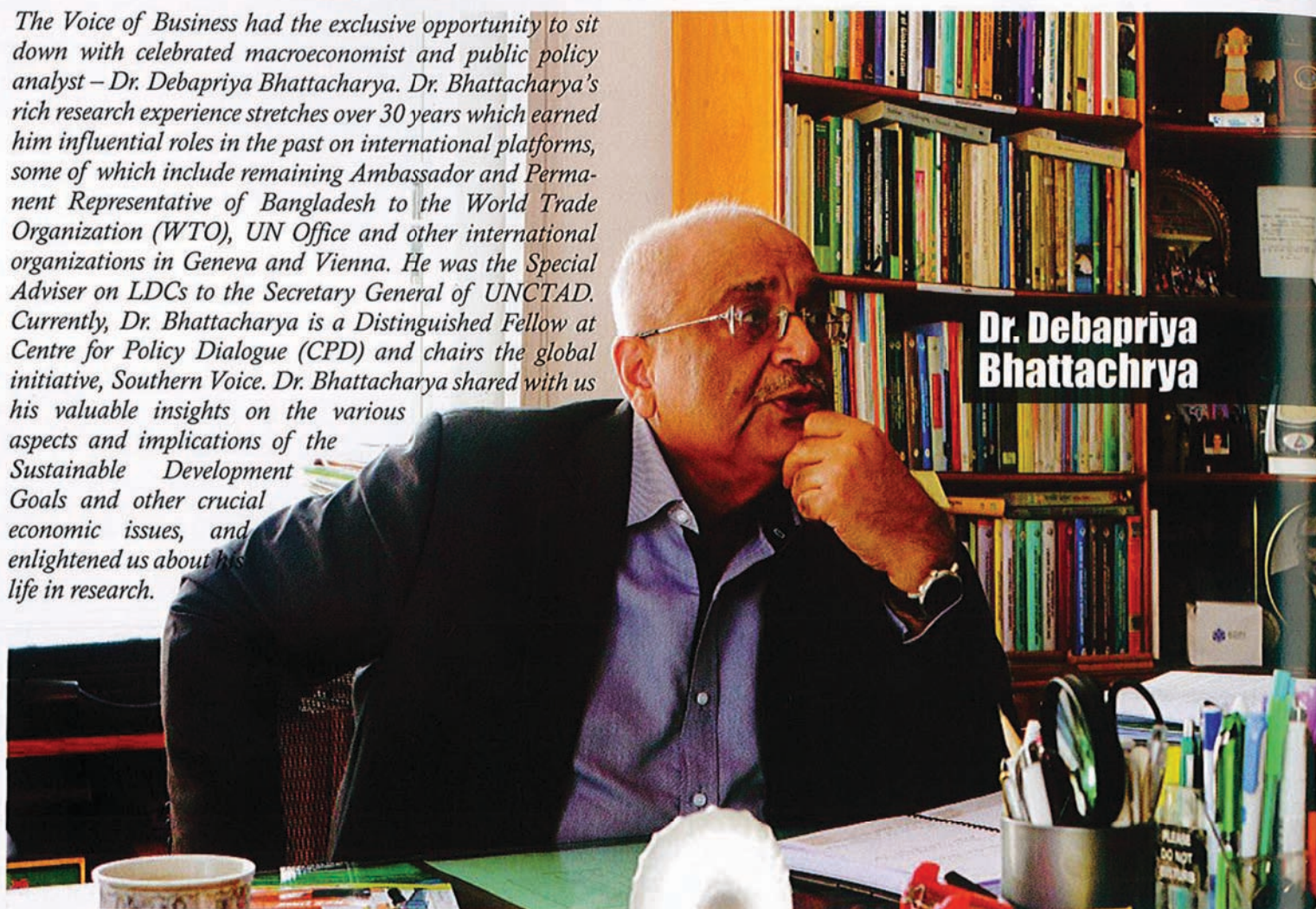


The Voice of Business had the exclusive opportunity to sit down with celebrated macroeconomist and public policy analyst – Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya. Dr. Bhattacharya's rich research experience stretches over 30 years which earned him influential roles in the past on international platforms, some of which include remaining Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the World Trade Organization (WTO), UN Office and other international organizations in Geneva and Vienna. He was the Special Adviser on LDCs to the Secretary General of UNCTAD. Currently, Dr. Bhattacharya is a Distinguished Fellow at Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and chairs the global initiative, Southern Voice. Dr. Bhattacharya shared with us his valuable insights on the various aspects and implications of the Sustainable Development Goals and other crucial economic issues, and enlightened us about his life in research.



You are currently the chair of a global initiative called Southern Voice. Please enlighten us on its objective and activities.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) began taking shape following the 2005 World Summit in New York. After reviewing relevant literature of 2010, I concluded that although the issues primarily concern developing countries, 80% of the literature originated in the Global North; of the remaining 20%, 10% came from Southern scholars based in the North. Thus, only 10% had actually come from Southern think tanks and academia. I realized there was a knowledge asymmetry because the Southern countries including the governments and us researchers did not have adequate participation in the global development debates and related processes. This was partly due to access and/or capacity constraints. I thus wanted to take the initiative to connect local research to the global landscape and vice versa. Consequently, Southern Voice was conceived – a network of 49 think tanks located in 22 countries around the world, across 3 regions. At a Think Tank Initiative (TT) meeting in Cape Town (June 2012), we had a number of very interesting roundtables on “Hot Topics” and one of them had been on the theme “Post-MDG”. The twenty participants of the session decid-

ed to take the discussion forward by launching what is known today as the Southern Voice network. It was a unique role where the direct contribution of a research economist was serving and giving voice to Southern countries and vulnerable regions. With the gaveling of the SDGs at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a paradigm shift in Southern Voice's activities has been noted: from the shaping of the post-2015 agenda to implementation-related issues and challenges. Southern Voice, in a very short time, has thus created a unique space for itself, received brand recognition and created a new platform for development researchers and economists from the Global South.

Do these think-tanks of Southern Voice have any formal channel or association established with their respective governments to ensure incorporation of your findings and suggestions in public projects?

First of all, there are two channels of doing that – first, within the country; whenever you are doing some analysis you consult the respective government in both the preparation of the report and in agenda setting, and alert them of any possible shortcomings. For example, currently we

are discussing what it means to implement the 2030 Agenda for Bangladesh in terms of how we are going to integrate, prioritise or indigenize them with our 7th 5 year plan and national sustainable development strategies. But with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) having 17 goals under its umbrella unlike the narrow focus of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), we have to figure out who is going to coordinate and lead the delivery of the SDGs; and how the assessment and monitoring of SDG implementation will be done. We are assisting domestically by informing, inter alia, which resources would be necessary to eradicate poverty in the country. It is also important for us to connect with the global platform. These global platforms are also very keen on having our inputs directly, free of cost, and delivered at the door step. Hence, we link it up in 2 ways – on the ground and globally as well. But I definitely wish we could have been more effective within the country.

One of the prime concerns of the global goals is tackling climate change. Now unless these developed economies come effectively on board to limit carbon emissions, how meaningful and feasible will the developing economies' efforts be at the end of the day? And what is the needful to be done?

It's not the South but the North which needs to cut down on its consumption of energy consuming products and wastage. The consumption basket has to change. The way we produce has to change. This brings emphasis on renewable energy. The responsibility thus, justifiably falls on big polluters – not on absolute amounts, but on per capita basis, which points towards the North. Secondly, we have put too much emphasis on adaptation while the North continues polluting, instead of focusing on mitigation measures of pollution. The third issue is technology. So-called green technology or environment-friendly technology is produced in the North, as private intellectual property. We need the mechanism where greener technology becomes publicly accessible, particularly if the technology has been produced with public money. The last issue is money. Financing for the SDGs that are related to climate change action is an issue. The issue is – the South is expected to pay up for a situation for which they are not responsible. Here, innovative financing like Tobin tax or Carbon Border tax is required both to penalise the polluter and to concurrently create a fund to compensate the victims.

Coming to our domestic issues, Government is still going to go ahead with the controversial Rampal power plant project. This and similar projects highlights the conundrum between current vs. future consumption. As an

economist, or pragmatist what's your opinion on such matters?

My take on it is very simple – I would love to see all the necessary environmental and socioeconomic assessment reports. We cannot look for a black cat in a dark room which may not exist. So if the scenario is so positive, give us the necessary documentation and ensure transparency. My only request to all concerned parties is that let us not deal with misinformation and prejudices, rather – have all the documents. Let us do a public hearing on it with the best possible experts on all sides because it is not for today – it is to be done for generations together to enjoy. On one hand, we need energy; on the other hand, we should not be really spoiling our country and the future generation's consumption structure including a mangrove forest which cannot be redone. As you said, we are researchers; we do evidence based analysis. I do not have evidence at this moment of either side. I understand the cause of both the sides.

We are also not oblivious about the financing mechanism because at the end of the day, we will have to pay back. Thankfully I don't have to, you will. But, when we raise the question of finance, it doesn't mean we are questioning the rationale of the project. I am talking about how efficiently it can be done. So, if a tempo used to cross a bridge at Tk. 10, it will now have to pay Tk. 30 for the same. So there are environmental, economic and social dimensions along with governance to be considered.

Sir, you have a very rich academic and research background. In your youth, did you already have your career goals charted out in your mind?

Definitely not – this is the default option. I wanted to be a lawyer but circumstances made me an economist. According to Plato, it's a lawyer and a doctor who can give instant lift to a person. So I wanted to be one but it didn't happen. But I don't regret that as I would not have met you guys today. Going back, I was quite active in student politics but then I thought, how can you give deliverance if you don't know how to do it? So I focused on studies and went to a country which does not exist- Soviet Union. People quite often ask me "why did you go there?" I usually say "I went to learn how to bring about a revolution". And when people ask if I did, I reply "I now know how not to do it".

How did you go onto become a practicing economist and a Policy Analyst?

Upon returning to the country after doing my PhD in Economics in the mid-80s, fortunately within fifteen days,

I got involved in a research program with Professor Rehman Sobhan on aid dependency. I had gone away from the country when I had been 18 years old. After a decade or more of research and publishing a number of papers in journals, I found that the world was not changing. Sure, I was getting promoted, gaining recognition and earning some money but Bangladesh was not changing. Then I figured that all my research ended with two things; firstly, it was too complicated to draw a general conclusion and secondly, we needed to conduct other related studies. That's why I left the best premier research institution BIDS, to join and develop CPD. I thought this was the missing link where research could translate into doable policy action, public agenda. But I am possibly approaching a late life crisis—the world is still not changing fast enough.

Do you think those wishing a career in research miss out on any particular trait or certain lifestyle requirement that comes along with such a career route?

Research is a vocation – not a profession. There is no money in it. If you are successful then maybe you might gain some recognition. Research is your ability to analytically think and a desire to find a solution in a social environment, which is quite different from other disciplines where you can conduct controlled experiments. But in

society, you cannot do controlled experiments to get a result; you have to wait too long for it. Patience is thus fundamental. A competency issue is there but I think it's more about passion of doing a public service, no less than what a doctor or engineer does. You will have to read five books and then make a sixth conclusion – which is your opinion. So I will encourage you to come but don't come looking for a profession. And, researchers do not get acknowledgement or prominence so fast.

Finally, when you look at the youngsters today, what kind of affirmations do you get about the future of this country?

I feel very envious if not jealous because you have access to better information. And, I also believe in you because you have seen our country, both the potentials and the challenges. You have known of the phase from democracy to autocracy and back to democracy; you have learnt that there was famine and draught at the same time and how we eradicated them. So, I think that the new generation is both inspirational and practical. That gives me the courage. Most importantly, you will be living longer and there will be so much to come. When I was of your age, I used to think that I need to shake it all up and day after tomorrow things will be okay. Now with age, I have understood that a revolution happens only through increment.



Thing(s) you do to take your mind off depressing facts & figures

- I listen to music quite a lot. I have an eclectic taste so I listen to everything from Lalon and Rabindra Sangit to rap, blues and jazz.



Wackiest critic you ever received

- CPD doesn't want Bangladesh to graduate to a middle income country or doesn't see any good in this country.



Childhood Hobby

- I started collecting stamps. In the 60s that's how you learned about the world.

QUICK FIRE

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