



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewer: Andrew Schalkwyk

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SCHALKWYK: Today is the 21<sup>st</sup> of February. I'm with Mr. Farooq Sobhan at his residence in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Can I ask if you've given your consent for this interview?

SOBHAN: Yes.

SCHALKWYK: Before we talk a little bit about your current work, can I ask if you'd give a brief history of what you've done, the experiences you've had in the past, the positions you've held and what you're currently involved in?

SOBHAN: *Very briefly, I joined the diplomatic service in 1964. We did a two-year training program and then I was posted out to Cairo and then from there to Paris. I was in Paris in '71. I came back in early '72 to join the newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka. I served as the first Director for North and South America as well as the Asia-Pacific region. I then served as counselor in Belgrade and in Moscow. I came back as Director-General, Multilateral Economic Affairs and the UN (United Nations) and then served in New York at the United Nations as Ambassador Deputy Permanent Representative followed by Ambassadorships in Malaysia and China. I came back briefly as the Additional Foreign Secretary and then served for three years as High Commissioner or Ambassador to India and concluded my career as Foreign Secretary from March of 1995 until September of 1997.*

*Thereafter I was invited to, on contract, to serve as Chairman of the Board of Investment and also as the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, which is like a roving ambassador, which is what I did until the end of 1999. Finally left government service at the end of 1999. I established, with some friends, the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute and on the first of October 2000. This is an independent think tank. We do work on economic and foreign policy. We have currently about forty people working with us. [interruption, end of tape one.]*

SCHALKWYK: This is part two of the interview with Ambassador Farooq Sobhan. You were describing the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute.

SOBHAN: *We do work on economic and foreign policy. The main thrust of the institute is working on private sector development which covers a range of programs. We do work on corporate governance, corporate social responsibility, helping to improve the investment climate in the country. We work very closely with the government on a whole range of policy issues. Currently I'd say our flagship program is training of government servants.*

*We also have a large program on counter-terrorism. We do regular roundtable meetings on foreign policy and we have a special interest in India-Bangladesh relations and regional cooperation in South Asia.*

SCHALKWYK: Most of the people in this organization, are they Bangladeshi?

SOBHAN: *They're all Bangladeshi, however we have agreed to take on, as we do from time to time, some interns who aren't Bangladeshi nationals and we will be having a couple working with us in a few months' time.*

SCHALKWYK: So you say that the flagship program, or the flagship of the organization is the training of civil servants.

**SOBHAN:** *Currently, we're on the verge of completing phase one of the program. We'd earlier done a pilot program where we ran workshops and roundtable meetings for some 37 mid-level government servants which was two years ago. Partly the thrust of that program was to familiarize them with certain concepts and practices relevant to modern civil service. A civil service better equipped to deal with the issues and problems of the private sector. So that is really the main thrust of the work which we are doing in the training programs.*

*We have, in this group of sixty, the focus has been on regulatory reform, regulatory reform impact assessment, removal of administrative barriers. So it is familiarizing them with concepts and best practices and also encouraging them in their respective departments to see what the bottlenecks are and what improvements can be made in terms of creating a greater level of efficiency. They're currently in Korea for one-week study under the auspices of the Korean Development Institute, KDI, who are our partners in this training program along with the BRAC Institute of Governance Studies.*

*The next program which we hope to take up from next month is to design and develop a program which would be the rough equivalent of an MBA or you might even call it an MPA program for civil servants. We will do it following a needs assessment exercise and then run a pilot with about roughly sixty government servants. If the pilot works out well then we hope to run this program pretty much for all mid-level and even we're looking—we have currently five levels in the government service. You join as an Assistant Secretary. You become a Senior Assistant Secretary. Then you move on to being a Director or a Deputy Secretary and then we have a Joint Secretary, an Additional Secretary, and a Permanent Secretary. So we'd run this program for Senior Assistant Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries and Joint Secretaries.*

**SCHALKWYK:** How do you select the people who take part in the program?

**SOBHAN:** *Well, part of it, the way we have done it so far, we have invited government ministries and government departments and organizations to nominate people whom they think would be appropriate for such a program. I expect that practice will continue, of course with inputs from the Establishment Ministry which is responsible for the movement and placement of all government servants.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Who funds the training program? Does the government pay—?

**SOBHAN:** *This training program is supported by something called the Bangladesh Investment Climate Fund, BICF. BICF is run by the IFC (International Finance Corporation). The funds have been made available by DFID (Department for International Development) and the European Commission.*

**SCHALKWYK:** So could you talk to me a little bit about the curriculum of these training programs? How long do they last?

**SOBHAN:** *The previous one ran for, the first one, call it a kind of pilot, ran for approximately a year, a little over a year.*

**SCHALKWYK:** When was that exactly?

**SOBHAN:** *We ran that in 2005, 2006 and the current one has been running for the past six months or so and will come to an end by the end of this month or middle of next month. Then we hope to begin the third in the series. This is an ongoing exercise. We expect to do further programs including programs specifically designed for senior civil servants and looking at some of the more successful programs for civil servants in the area of private sector development, in the area of how do you create a more efficient climate for doing business within the country and what could and should be the role of government in making that possible.*

**SCHALKWYK:** The civil servants have spent the whole six months, the whole of the last six months, with your organization?

**SOBHAN:** *No. The way we ran the first as well as the second program is, it's mainly in the shape of roundtable meetings, seminars, working group meetings. We bring in people from the World Bank to speak on various subjects and within the working group we get them to focus on some of the reforms and administrative changes that will be appropriate and helpful. We've hired, for this program a group of retired civil servants who serve as mentors. So the faculty or resource persons change from program to program depending on the specific needs of the time.*

**SCHALKWYK:** How did you select the focus of the training?

**SOBHAN:** *Well, this was primarily designed by the IFC, the International Finance Corporation, it is an affiliate of the World Bank. With of course some inputs from us. So they provided the broad framework of the kind of training program they thought appropriate and then a process of consultations takes place. They tendered the project out, so we bid for it. Then following the bidding process they selected our firm in partnership as I said with the BRAC Institute of Governance Studies to carry out these training programs.*

*Then we go through a process of fairly intensive consultations in finalizing the design of the program and its content. So they have oversight responsibilities. We work closely with them. So they may, as they do, try and come up with some suggestions and recommendations on how we may improve the program. We also work closely with the government servants themselves and sometimes we incorporate some of their suggestions in terms of how we run the program.*

**SCHALKWYK:** What sort of feedback do you get back from the government servants? Is there a formalized—?

**SOBHAN:** *We have a very strict, you might say, evaluation exercise. I'd say that both, I mean we evaluate them and they evaluate us and the program. I'd say that both in the case of the first and second programs by and large it has gone well. We've had good results, we've seen changes particularly in the attitude and approach of the government servants to handling problems, outlook about the private sector and the business community I think has changed for the better. We've found that the number of areas, we also try and improve their writing and reporting skills.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Is that in English or in Bengali?

**SOBHAN:** *In English. Then we help them actually to try and think through some of the problems, some of the administrative barriers that might exist, some of the*

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*regulatory reforms that might be required. Our assessment is that the program has shown good results.*

SCHALKWYK: Is there a feedback mechanism for a longer term in terms of the impact of the program on the civil service?

SOBHAN: *Yes, certainly, and of course we expect that the government itself through the Establishment Ministry will carry out their own exercise. One, I think, critical feature or component of the program is that we are seeking to train a range of people who do have the maximum interface with the private sector. So if you're in the Customs Authority or in export processing zones or if you're on the Board of Investment, and various other departments of the government, you are in constant touch with the private sector.*

*I think what we think is that is of critical importance is that once these people are trained and go through this process that they are kept in the positions where they will have this opportunity to use this experience or this training program to maximum effect. We follow a system whereby we, with few exceptions, there is very little room for specialization. You could be working one day in the Ministry of Energy and the next day in the Ministry of Culture and the third day in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. We of course have argued that if we train someone in the area of regulatory reform and regulatory impact assessment or if we train someone in part in some specialized skills in some of the areas of importance in improving the investment climate, that it is important, it is imperative that these persons continue to occupy certain positions.*

*So one of the, say, long term objectives really is to create the equivalent of a specialized cadre of officers who would have gone through these training programs which we will be conducting and who will then occupy certain positions. One of the issues which we are of course grappling with, and there is an inter-relationship between what I've just said and this is how do you motivate these people? What is the incentive for them to pursue this program because they are having to do this program over and above their normal duties?*

*As I said we may run workshops, we may, as we have in this case send them out for one week's study to Korea. We have had study tours within Bangladesh itself. We've put them through two-week English-language training program. But by and large all of this is being done in addition to their normal duties. It isn't that the government has given them time off to do this program. So naturally from their point of view, since they're being asked to put in extra time, what's in it for them? That's one of the issues we have been grappling with. We feel that perhaps the most important motivation for them could be that they then become, if you like, the equivalent of the praetorian guard sort of out there in the forefront and performing certain functions and a certain role. There is recognition of their specialized training and there is recognition of the fact that they are better placed to perform certain jobs than those who haven't gone through this training process.*

*So we do need to get strong buy in from the government. One of the critical features of these training programs has been to try and get strong buy in from successive governments. We have had three changes of government just during the period we have been conducting these programs. So each time there is a change in government it means talking to some of the new people in key*

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*positions and getting them on board. So far we have been quite successful. Each successive government has responded positively.*

*I think there is, in my view, a widespread awareness and recognition that we do need to improve the quality of the civil service and that training is a key element there. But there are other things that need to be done which we think this government will do. One are where I have personally given special importance is how do we attract the best and the brightest to join the government. I believe that is not happening. It used to happen in the old days. The first choice of career for a number of people who got into the government, let's say in the '50s and '60s, was that this was their first preference which was considered an extremely prestigious profession. If people couldn't get in to government through the competitive exam process they would then look for other options, such as joining a multinational company or one of the large banks and so on.*

*Now I would say the situation has reversed. Part of the problem of course is that 90% of our students who go overseas don't come back. In my time that never happened. I'd say then the ratio was the other way around, 90% of us did come back. So I think that government has to look at how it can make government service more attractive, sufficiently so to attract the best and the brightest including people overseas.*

*One of those who recommended that we should be competing with the private sector in terms of salaries and other benefits that government servants would have access to. I think it is also very important to create a culture of meritocracy so people are rewarded for ability and this is recognized and there is a system of accelerated promotion. In our service promotion is almost entirely on the basis of seniority. Then we do need to go in for more specialization. So I think part of the need for the reform process and agenda is to not simply look at training which is what we're doing at the moment but also to look at some of these other issues which I've just mentioned.*

SCHALKWYK: You say that people need to have their skills recognized. Do you think that this has happened with the people who have gone through your program? Have they stuck in positions where they could use these skills?

SOBHAN: *Well yes, by and large, but not always. So we do need to kind of sit down and work this through in a more systematic manner with the government. There has been talk for some time now that we, as was the case many years ago during the Pakistan time, you had something known as the Economic Pool. You had a group of officers who were specially trained to occupy certain positions and certain positions were earmarked for officers of the economic pool. I think maybe we need to revive something along those lines. Certain positions within the government would be earmarked for specialists.*

*But then we're also talking about, for example, if you take our Ministry of Commerce. We need officers. I would say starting right at the top with the Permanent Secretary and going downwards, who are specialists, who know the WTO (World Trade Organization), who know the issues relating to the WTO, who have certain negotiating skills in this area. So this cannot and should not be an area for the generalists.*

SCHALKWYK: What body has been responsible for improving the fact that people stay in a particular position? Where has that reform happened?

**SOBHAN:** *Well, that's the responsibility of the Ministry of Establishment. That is where we have been working with them. Actually when I say the Ministry of Establishment traditionally over the last three governments and I expect this will be equally the case this time around, the Prime Minister's office has been, if you like, the focal point of the government. At the end of the day pretty much all decisions, important decisions end up in the Prime Minister's office and need her approval. So if we can get buy in from the Prime Minister herself and her office, that this is something worth doing, then it makes life a lot easier. So we need to both get the Establishment Ministry or division which in fact is under the Prime Minister's office, the Prime Minister and, I assume, some of her key advisors, key staff, to support this.*

**SCHALKWYK:** To go back to the training. Who has been doing the training? Has it been people from abroad, has it been civil servants?

**SOBHAN:** *It is a mix. As I said, we've hired some retired civil servants. I've been involved in some of the training exercises. We do use experts from abroad depending on the subject. We've worked very closely with KDI. We have resource persons from the BRAC Institute of Governance. So it is a mixed bag.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Can you describe the relationship with BRAC IGS a little bit more?

**SOBHAN:** *Yes, as I said, we have a partnership arrangement with them in terms of the training programs which we are training out both in terms of the present program, and in terms of the one I mentioned, the design of what would be similar to an MBA program both in developing and designing that program and in implementing the pilot. We work closely together so we'll have some personnel from BRAC and some personnel from our institute, plus of course KDI. So the three of us will work together on this.*

**SCHALKWYK:** What is KDI?

**SOBHAN:** *The Korean Development Institute.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Of course.

**SOBHAN:** *This is an Institute which today is regarded as one of the finest in Asia for training of civil servants. The Indians and the Pakistanis and of course Bangladeshis have been, over the years, sending quite a few of their civil servants to KDI for different types of training programs.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Can you think of any particular reforms that you think may have come out of this program, or at least from the alumni of this program?

**SOBHAN:** *As I said, one of the key features of the program so far, and I'm referring to the first program which we did, as well as the program which we are currently doing. I would say that three key objectives are underpinning the program. One is to kind of bridge the gap between the government or government servants and the private sector. For a long time I would say, and to some extent it is still there, it was an us versus them relationship, a rather adversarial relationship. So the idea was, it took, in so many matters you need the government and the private sector to work closely together, particularly in terms of the reforms that have taken place and the changes of the economic policy that have taken place.*

*Today the government relies heavily on the private sector in terms of economic growth and development. We think that this, more than anything else, requires a good working relationship between government and the private sector. So in the old days the private sector would just get the run around; there would be delays, there would be demands for kickbacks and so on. We want to change that culture. So part of our training program both then and now is to closely involve the private sector. So we actually, in this group of sixty, have five private sector representatives taking part. So effectively we're saying look, we're all on the same side.*

*When we did the first initial pilot, our sense was that there was a great deal of hostility almost on the part of the government servants towards the private sector. I think one very important achievement when we finished this pilot was that there was a significant measurable change in the attitude of the civil servants. So I think that was one key feature.*

*Second was to encourage them to think something which I think had never happened before, or if it had it was done in a very kind of unsystematic way, was to think about how they could make their respective departments or ministries more efficient, more effective in terms of removing impediments or in the way of regulations, in the way certain decisions were taken. So how do you inject a greater measure of efficiency.*

*One of the exercises which we did was to also get the private sector to identify what they consider to be some of the major barriers to doing business.*

SCHALKWYK: So you have brought the private sector in?

SOBHAN: *Absolutely.*

SCHALKWYK: What are the barriers do they see today do they say?

SOBHAN: *They refer to problems they had with customs in the clearance of their goods. They refer to a wide range of issues and problems. Then we got the private sector and the government servants to sit down together to see what could be the solution to these problems. It was interesting that we could find solutions to these problems. I think it was, although the main thrust of the program was trying to encourage the government to think out of the box and to think creatively, we did have the benefit of getting at least some recommendations which we then passed on to government to say look, through an exercise jointly undertaken by private sector representatives and government servants.*

*Some of these administrative barriers and bottlenecks can be removed. Why don't you have a look at these and some improvements were made.*

SCHALKWYK: So they have implemented some of those?

SOBHAN: *Some of those have been implemented. But then, as I said, we've gone through a series of changes of government. Each time that happens then it kind of—you have to pretty much start at the beginning with the new government.*

*I think the third was to kind of familiarize them with certain important concepts. This whole idea of what is regulatory reform, best practices, regulatory impact*

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*assessment. The need for a kind of a different culture within the civil service and the need to impart certain basic skills. I think that was also very useful and important.*

SCHALKWYK: What kinds of skills?

*SOBHAN: Improving language and presentation and writing skills and helping them to understand certain concepts like what is competition policy. I would say before we ran this program virtually no one in the government knew what competition policy was or indeed what regulatory impact assessment was. So we could give you a number of these.*

SCHALKWYK: Some of those things, since the civil servants have gone through this program, have they been able to put in place some of the reforms themselves within their ministries?

*SOBHAN: Yes. There have been some changes in terms of how long it would take to get something done so that there are improvements on time management issues, improvements in the area of transparency, improvement in the whole decision-making process. One of the big problems—we also do, on a regular basis for the World Bank, investment climate surveys. One of the constant problems which has been identified by businessmen, large, small and ,medium are the delays they experience in getting whether it is approval or decisions of one kind or another from the government. So a lot of their time is lost, valuable time, in knocking on government doors. The lower down you are on the totem pole, the more difficult it is for you to get quick decisions. So this certainly adds to the cost of doing business. This is something which we are also trying very hard to impress on the government, that we have to be competitive and time is money and how quickly government can take decisions then becomes a key feature in determining, not simply government sufficiency but our ability to compete with other countries in the region and beyond.*

SCHALKWYK: With some of these reforms, do you think it is possible for mid-level civil servants to implement them or does it have to come down from the top?

*SOBHAN: No, I think mid-level civil servants have a very important role to play and part of our culture has been if you get mid-level civil servants to take initiatives or make recommendations, it becomes very difficult for the people at the top to reverse those decisions. So I think one of the key features in ensuring more efficient government as a whole is really being able to produce civil servants at the lowest as well as at the mid level who have a proper understanding of these issues and if they can kind of be more actively involved in the reform process, come up with ideas and put up with, follow a system of noting on files and the file travels up and down. Well if they put up a note which says this is what we think is the right way of doing it, it is difficult for the seniors to reverse it.*

*Of course, the other way it is also very important I think to have some champions right at the top because then they can also play a key role in encouraging their juniors to think differently and to work differently on these issues. So some of this can be top down, some of this can be bottom up.*

SCHALKWYK: Do you think there are champions within the Bangladeshi civil service?

**SOBHAN:** *A few. We would like to work in developing many more. We've—the civil service has unfortunately gone through a hard time. One of the things that has happened which in my view is extremely regrettable, has been the politicization of the civil service. So people today are identified as belonging to one or another of the political parties. This was never the case in the past. Governments came and governments went. The civil service was a permanent civil service. They were required to loyally serve whichever government was in power. So the issue of civil servants favoring one or another political party was never an issue. Unfortunately today it is an issue.*

**SCHALKWYK:** What do you think has caused it?

**SOBHAN:** *I'd say the kind of extremely acrimonious relationship between the two largest political parties in the country. This is kind of filtered down through not simply the bureaucracy. We have it also in sports, music, their people and our people. So virtually no part of society or of life has been exempt from this. Just as if you go abroad, we now have large Bangladeshi communities all over the world. Wherever you go you'll find groups that support one or the other political parties rather than a group which is willing to work together to support the country.*

*So I think this has been a setback. We do need to look for ways to return to let's say the culture and the practice of the past which is to have a truly independent civil service whose political loyalties and affiliations should never come into play at all.*

**SCHALKWYK:** Do you have any ideas about how that could happen?

**SOBHAN:** *Yes, I think it could happen in two or three different ways. One is recognition on the part of the political leadership that this is not good for the country. I think to have some independent body which would monitor this and scrutinize this. So that if, for example, some people are unfairly pigeonholed, and that does happen, as belonging to one or the other party when in fact they belong to neither, that justice is done. Then right through the training program you're training the civil servants and at the same time you're working with the politicians, the members of Parliament, members of the government to say, government servants are government servants, they are not in politics. We will, collectively, work at ensuring that it remains this way as it was in the past.*

**SCHALKWYK:** To wrap this up, what do you think has worked very well in the program and what do you think you would change if you were to re-imagine the training program that you're working on?

**SOBHAN:** *Well, as I said, we are in fact early days as far as this program is concerned. This program is going to continue over the next four years. It will have different components. We're doing it sort of program by program rather than one omnibus program. So I think both phase one and phase two which we're about the complete should equip us well for phase three which in some ways is going to be the most ambitious program we would have attempted because we would be designing a program drawn on our experience from phase one and phase two which we would then like to administer to all government servants.*

*As I said, it will have three or four key components to it. One is to equip them with, let's say, certain modern concepts and skills which are common today to the civil service of other countries including our neighbors. To improve overall the*

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*quality of the service. Also, I think create in part a sense of pride in what they do. I think it is important that government servants feel a sense of confidence about their responsibilities and the ability to discharge those responsibilities. I think part of it is to also inject a strong sense of pride in the work they do. So it is in some ways a morale-boosting exercise.*

*They can, in conferences abroad, hold their own against the best and the brightest in negotiations and understanding concepts and how to implement them. Therefore they are also better equipped in providing advice and input on one hand to the politicians, their political masters, the ministers, cabinet ministers and the like. On the other hand, they can also serve the people, the private sector more efficiently, more effectively. So I think that is the overall objective of the exercise to at the end of the day create a more efficient, more effective civil service.*

SCHALKWYK: Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

SOBHAN: *No, I think that that is it. As I said, I have certain ideas of reform central to which is really the need to try and attract the best and the brightest. I think in order to do that the government must demonstrate its willingness to recognize ability and merit and reward it proportionately. If someone is earning, as many people are, fat salaries abroad and you want them back, well, you should be willing at least, commensurate with salaries paid in the private sector here, to pay them better.*

*I think most important of all I would say the thing that we enjoyed most was sort of pride in place in society. A certain amount of dignity and respect including from cabinet ministers and the top. In the old days when we gave advice to cabinet ministers and even to the Prime Minister, rarely was this advice ignored or set aside. So you must also respect this, the need, for a competent bureaucracy. But you must make sure that at the end of the day you have a competent bureaucracy.*

SCHALKWYK: Thank you very much for your time.