ISSUE BRIEF: VALUE ADDED TAXES in ASIA[1]
Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development

The Value Added Tax (VAT) has become a key mechanism of tax systems worldwide since it was first implemented in France in 1948, and has covered even more ground with IMF backing. As the name suggests, VAT is charged at every stage of production and is computed on the basis of the value added in the process. It is similar to a sales or consumption tax but differs in the way it is collected. The taxpayer pays VAT on its purchases of inputs and then collects this from its sales. Being a tax on gross and final consumption, end consumers pay the full cost of VAT (e.g., Bird and Gendron 2007).

VAT and other indirect taxes now account for up to two-thirds of tax revenues in most developing and low income countries, while only about a third of tax revenues is raised from these sources in developed countries (UNDP 2). Notwithstanding the pressure of IMF loan conditionality on borrowing countries to adopt and strengthen VAT, the Fund nonetheless credits widening VAT buy-in to its presumably inherent qualities of efficiency and hence, a higher revenue-raising potential compared to other tax measures.

As of January 2016, OECD listed 167 countries collecting VAT in one form or another (OECD, Consumption Tax Trends 181-184). This is bound to increase further as it is pushed as an alternative to the loss of revenue especially in developing countries as trade tariffs fall and as corporate tax competition grows fiercer. The trend has been described by the IMF as "the most dramatic—and probably most important—development in taxation in the latter part of the twentieth century, and it still continues" (Ebrill, Keen, Bodin & Summers).

VAT as key policy advice and loan conditionality

The IMF, the World Bank and other international financial institutions (IFIs) have consistently championed the adoption and increase of VAT among developing countries. Indeed, as observed by Keen and Lockwood (2010), "[t]he probability of adoption is significantly related to participation in a Fund-supported program" (Cottarelli 23, note 25). During the height of structural adjustment programmes foisted upon the Global South, VAT was a standard conditionality for cash-strapped economies seeking loans, along with privatization of state facilities, freezing wages, laying off public sector workers and slashing social service budgets. Developing countries in need of cash and reliant on borrowings typically adopt their VAT laws under these circumstances.

Though the IMF denies using one-size-fits-all approaches, VAT is a commonplace element of tax-related proposals in IMF Article IV consultation reports and remains a standard structural reform requirement that borrowing countries must undertake alongside cuts in trade tariffs and direct taxes. The latest IMF Review of Conditionality indicated that this remains the case. It acknowledged that "'between 2006 and 2010, the number of tax policy conditions in Fund programmes increased tenfold'". These include adopting or raising VAT, introducing other indirect taxes, rationalizing tax expenditures and reducing corporate income taxes (IMF 2011 Review of Conditionality as cited in Griffiths and Todoulos 15). Such structural requisites count among the "binding conditions" the Fund considers core areas vital to the success of its loan programmes. While countries are supposed to have the last say, non-implementation is hardly an option; countries need to request a waiver by the IMF's Executive Board which could cause reputational damage in international markets (Andersen 2009 cited in Kentikelenis, Stubbs and King 13[EB1]).

[1] Culled from Buenaventura, Mae and Miranda, Claire. "The gender dimensions of the IMF's key fiscal policy advice on resource mobilisation in developing countries". Brettonwoods Project, April 2017.

In their study, Kentikelenis et. al. (2016) found a staggering 55,465 IMF loan conditions from 1985-2014, composed of both core and non-core areas. Of almost 48,000 conditions pertaining to core areas, policy changes on fiscal issues, revenues and taxation numbered 13,756, or 25 per cent (16). Initially, IMF's tax policy advice was limited to setting revenue targets but this eventually broadened to the adoption of VAT as a key tax reform measure and the reduction of trade tariffs (Broome and Seabrooke 2007; Polak 1991; Seabrooke 2010[EB2]cited in Kentikelenis, Stubbs and King).

Egypt is the newest country to have adopted VAT. In August 2016, Parliament passed the Egyptian VAT Act of 2016 and thereafter approved a 13% VAT rate. This change to the Egyptian tax system sought to unlock the first $1 billion-tranche of a $3 billion loan from the World Bank. Welcoming the move and other austerity measures as steps in the right direction, the IMF expressed support through a $12 billion loan commitment to Egypt over the next three years (International Monetary Fund, Transcript of IMF Press Briefing, 2016). [EB3])

For countries with VAT laws already in place, increasing rates is a well-defined trend. An International Labour Organisation study of 187 countries reported consumption tax increases from 2010-2015 in 93 developing countries and 45 high-income countries. Among developing countries 27 are in Sub-Saharan Africa, 18 in East Asia and the Pacific, 18 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 14 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 9 in the Middle East and North Africa and 7 in South Asia. The highest percentages of countries implementing consumption tax hikes as part of IMF structural adjustment measures were in South Asia (86%), East Asia and the Pacific (76%), Middle East and North Africa (75%) (Ortiz, Cummins and Capaldo).

Sri Lanka is a clear example of rising VAT and the influencing role of the IMF. In June 2016, the Fund approved a three-year $1.5 billion loan meant to avert a possible balance of payments crisis in the country, on the condition that Sri Lanka embarked on structural reforms which included raising the VAT and privatizing state-owned enterprises. The measure, however, drew public protest, among them a petition filed by opposition lawmakers before the Sri Lankan Supreme Court arguing that amending the VAT law required parliamentary approval.

However, the delay proved only temporary for in September 2016, Parliament approved raising VAT from 11% to 15%. The amendment passed on shaky ground with clear support from only 112 MPs voting in favour; 46 MPs voted against it, while 65 MPs were absent. The decision came after a two-week IMF mission to Sri Lanka to discuss the country's pledges, during which time Head of Mission Jaewoo Lee reportedly stressed the importance of government "...[expediting] the legislative process of implementing the VAT amendments that are needed to support revenue targets for 2016 and 2017" (Gamage). He also reportedly stated that "[w]e want to see the VAT Amendment Bill to be submitted to Parliament. That will enable us to go to our board with good conscience (and say) that progress is (being) made" (Daily Mirror).

Persistent regressivity in developing country contexts and IMF's involvement

VAT has not always produced such clear-cut positive outcomes, as manifested in the experiences of developing, low income countries based chiefly on agriculture, and marked by large informal sectors, governments captured by elites, weak administrative capacities and low literacy levels, among others[BR4].

To varying degrees, VAT policy practice in developing country contexts indicated regressivity, meaning that it exacted proportionally steeper costs from the very vulnerable groups that could have benefitted most from the increased revenue, and less from higher income groups. Indirect/consumption taxes like VAT are widely recognized as [MB5]regressive income-wise (as opposed to progressive income taxes) because they levy the same rate on rich and poor consumers alike, resulting in a greater percentage of income being spent on tax by low-income earners than high-income earners. Proponents, notably the IMF, however assert that the gains outweigh the inequitable impacts, which can be cushioned even to a limited extent through exemptions and other pro-poor measures.

Bangladesh's experience with VAT bears noting. It remains in the UN category of Least Developed Countries with a GDP per capita of $1,404 as of October 2016 and ranked 148th among 186 countries. It has an estimated population of more than 154 million people, of which about 43% fall below the international poverty line of $1.25/day. Total adult literacy rate as of 2015 barely reached 60% (UNICEF). Up to 48% of the population work in agriculture and other primary sectors (International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook 2016[EB6]). About 87% of the labour force was employed in the informal economy as of 2010 (International Labour Organization).

VAT became part of Bangladesh's tax policy through the passage of the VAT Act of 1991. A general 15% rate was levied on imports, manufacturing, wholesale and retail sales of goods and services, but with the incorporation in the VAT law of other types of taxes and provisions for exemptions, zero rating and discounted rates, effective rates vary and implementation is complex. It also failed to improve the tax-to-GDP ratio, reported as one of the lowest worldwide (International Monetary Fund, Transcript of Press Briefing, 2016).

Persisting in its push for VAT as indicated in several Article IV consultation reports, the IMF urged even more rigorous implementation, including the removal of multiple VAT rates (Smith, Islam and Moniruzzaman). In 2012, Bangladesh passed a new VAT law imposing a consolidated, flat VAT rate of 15% on all sectors; preferential rates for cottage industries and small enterprises were also been removed. An IMF mission expressed full support for the move although the Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry had voiced concerns that the flat VAT rate, "will be suitable for large, wealthy corporations, but may be harmful for small and medium enterprises (SMEs)" (Asia Briefing). That same year, the IMF Executive Board approved a three-year deal for Bangladesh under the Extended Credit Facility which enabled the immediate disbursement of $258.3 million from the total amount of $904.2 million[2] (International Monetary Fund, Press Release 2015).

Showing its preference for shifting to VAT and away from direct taxes, the IMF also encouraged revenue-eroding measures specifically in trade. For instance, it noted in 2002 that notwithstanding gains in trade liberalization, the country's tariff hikes in the previous year "marked a significant step backward" for Bangladesh (International Monetary Fund). It also advised in 2007 that "with nominal protection at 24 percent, further tariff reductions are needed" (International Monetary Fund). Following IMF advice, Bangladesh saw trade taxes falling from 74% in 2005 to 28% in 2014; corporate income taxe (CIT) rates also declined from 27.5% to 25% in the Fiscal Year 2015-2016, resulting in only an 18% share in total revenue (SUPRO; Tax Justice-Africa; Oxfam 17, 23-24).

Earlier studies already found evidence of persistent regressivity under the old VAT law even with multiple rates which were intended to soften VAT's adverse impacts on small businesses. Using 2005 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, Faridy and Sarker found the average effective VAT rate of 6.01% to be higher than the effective VAT rates of the four highest income groups. Disparities were even greater at opposite ends of the income range: the VAT burden borne by the highest income level (BDT[3] 20,000) came to only

[2] Amounts equivalent to Special Drawing Rights of 822.805.
[3] Bangladeshi Taka. At 2005 rates, BDT20,000 and BDT3,999 translate approximately to $305.11 and $61, respectively.

4.56% while it amounted to 6.92% for the lowest income group (BDT3,999 and less). In terms of the relative burden of VAT (with exemptions) vis-à-vis monthly household per capita income, the poorest household earning BDT200 and less had a relative VAT burden of 404% in contrast to only 63% for those earning BDT3,500 and above. The authors also noted that raising the VAT registration threshold could reduce regressivity, but maintained that "more revenue can be collected by close monitoring of the large taxpayers through risk-based audit programmes" (188-190).

The implementation of a uniform VAT rate threatens to render the regressivity even more acute. As Hossian found from modelling studies, "a single, uniform rate VAT applying to all commodities (as is the case in New Zealand)… would be highly regressive resulting in wealthier people gaining while the majority of the population would be worse off" (Hossian as cited in Smith, et. al. 12-13). However, a single VAT rate from 10-20% has reportedly been typical IMF advice (Stotsky), a practice that continues to this day as seen in the case of Bangladesh and other countries.

The IMF and World Bank, for example, provided the Philippine government with comprehensive tax reform proposals that include a more far-reaching VAT through the removal of exemptions for senior citizens, persons with disabilities, social housing, cooperatives and electricity transmission (International Monetary Fund). This has been reflected in tax reform packages filed in Congress, except for seniors and PWDs due to public outcry. Package 1 which includes the VAT amendments as a way of offsetting revenue losses from reforms in personal income taxes will be enacted in May or June this year (Republic of the Philippines Department of Finance).

Challenging VAT's efficiency in developing country contexts

Other important features of developing economies are largely ignored by VAT proponents. One of these, pointed out by Stiglitz is the existence of large informal sectors where many economic activities are beyond the reach of the tax net (i.e., taxes on profits in trading VAT-covered commodities) (Development-Oriented Tax Policy 2010). Broad-based taxes are deemed "near impossible" to implement in contexts with high economic informality (Besley and Persson 110). Thus developing countries with sizeable informal sectors would find VAT a relatively inefficient tool for raising revenues because at that point of their development, VAT cannot as yet reach a potentially broader base.

> The usual argument for the VAT is that the VAT is not progressive, but it is efficient. Government should resort to other instruments for dealing with [re]distribution. But for developing countries, the VAT is not an efficient tax; it can, furthermore, lower growth and increase unemployment. Given the absence of other progressive taxes, however, the lack of progressivity of the VAT is of particular concern (Stiglitz 22-23).

A study by Martinez-Vazquez and Bird on VAT's performance saw growth, though modest, in the tax-to-GDP ratio of countries implementing VAT. However, comparing developed and developing countries with and without VAT, they reached conclusions that add further to doubts over VAT as the "'money machine'" claimed by the Fund.

> The much higher ratio for developed countries with a VAT than for developed countries without a VAT seems compatible with the VAT 'money machine' story. However, the tax ratio is lower for developing countries with a VAT than for developing countries without a VAT. Moreover, while the ratio has increased over the last decade for developing countries

without a VAT, it has declined for developing countries with a VAT. This is not quite compatible with the 'money machine' story. (17)

Revenue tradeoffs in shifting to VAT

Currently, developed countries heavily source their revenues from direct taxes. In contrast, developing countries have become more reliant on VAT and consumption taxes, consistent with IMF advice on shifting away from direct taxes such as corporate income taxes and trade tariffs.

In effect, developing countries moved away from "easy-to-collect" taxes, which includes trade tariffs, and in turn adopted "hard-to-collect" taxes such as VAT, to make up for shortfall in revenues according to Aizenman et. al. In their 19-year study of 60 countries, they pointed out the "significant investment in tax collection infrastructure, and spending resources on monitoring and enforcement" of hard-to-collect taxes. Moreover, they found the resulting revenue increase of 12% in low income countries minimal, "less than what was needed to compensate for the drop in the revenue from 'easy to collect' taxes". This also led to shrinking the total tax revenue of low income countries by 17% (as compared to only 3% for high income countries) (Aizenman and Jinjarak).

Embedded gender biases in VAT design and implementation

Using gender as a category of analysis brings out biases that would otherwise be missed in the general assumption that institutions such as national laws and policies are gender-neutral and apply equally to men and women alike. Interacting with various social stratifiers that include race/caste and economic status, gender or the socially constructed roles and behaviours deemed appropriate and "natural" for women and men influence the way they are impacted by policy. The outcomes of policy implementation are thus not the same for men and women due to gender-based differences and their intersections with other factors. These tend to manifest discriminatory effects such that lower income groups and poor or working women in particular who are also marginally situated in society, culture and the economy, are comparatively more disadvantaged.

Gender gaps in employment and wages, and in access to and control over resources such as land, education/training and financial services, occur across many countries worldwide. Women are also gender-tracked into services, such as providing care work for private households where wages are low, social benefits nil or inadequate and working conditions generally unregulated. Some key findings in a 2015 UN report on the world's women noted that:

- Globally, about three quarters of men and half of women participate in the labour force; the gender gap in participation has narrowed in only some regions and remains widest in Northern Africa, Western Asia and Southern Asia.
- Women's unemployment rate remains higher than men's in most countries, and the differences remain substantial.
- Women earn less than men across all sectors and occupations, with women working full-time earning between 70 and 90 per cent of what men earn in most countries.

(UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 87)

It is also well established that women bear a disproportionate share of the work that goes into caring for household or family members. Care labour is generally rendered in households as part of women's gender roles, and is most often unremunerated, as this is considered an inherent or natural inclination in women.. The UN DESA report observed as well that "[w]omen spend, on average, three hours more per day than men on unpaid work in developing countries and two hours more per day than men in developed countries; when all work—paid and unpaid—is considered, women work longer hours than men" (89). This extends to shaping consumption behaviour in gendered ways; compared to men, women tend to spend a larger share of their often smaller incomes on household needs (Grown and Valodia).

VAT, a tax borne by all final consumers, is thus particularly regressive for lower earning groups where women in waged work and those engaged in informal livelihoods often abound. Moreover, if gender differences are not taken into account from design to implementation, VAT can end up not only regressive but gender discriminatory as well.

A 2012 World Bank report citing lower productivity and earnings of female farmers and entrepreneurs as compared to their male counterparts also holds relevance for examining the gender dimensions of designing VAT structure. Value added per worker was found comparatively less in female-managed enterprises in urban areas – lower by 34% in Europe and Central Asia; 35% in Latin America; and 6-8% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bangladesh registered the biggest disparity; firms operated by men exhibited average output per worker that was eight times higher than those operated by women (World Bank 201).

These also resonate with Akram-Lodhi and Staveren's study of VAT implementation in Vietnam and its impacts on female-managed small and medium non-agricultural businesses. They traced the relatively lower earnings of women's MSMEs to gender-based differentials in the structures of input costs. Women-run enterprises over-estimated their value added if only because they turned to more costly informal lenders in the face of difficulties in accessing formal credit, while male-managed enterprises reduced their value added by drawing on their access to unpaid family labour. Women's MSMEs were also largely unregistered, meaning that they were "less likely to be able to redeem tax payments on the higher priced inputs that they obtain because of their lesser scale".[BR7][MB8]. The authors concluded, among others, that "the VAT structure fails to recognize gender-based differences in input cost structures" as well as in VAT registration.... Cumulatively, there can be little doubt that the VAT system demonstrates gender bias (Akram-Lodhi and Van Staveren 26).

Women's MSMEs in South countries adopting Fund advice on VAT depict similarities in gender-based obstacles that make gainful entrepreneurship more challenging for women than men. In an ILO study of female MSMEs in Pakistan, for example, women spoke of "1) discrimination, 2) limited access to productive resources (e.g., land, skills, technology, networks, information, 3) high registration costs, 4) high transaction costs, 5) high taxes and 6) complicated procedures for women entrepreneurs in joining the formal economy" (ILO 4). The study further stressed the "gender-blindness" in policy development and implementation, as they failed to appreciate the different needs of women-led enterprises at various stages of growing their businesses (ILO 24).

Valodia and Grown's study makes the case that VAT exemptions can at least reduce the indirect tax burden especially for poor and low-income women. Using consumption expenditure in their incidence analysis, they laid down an important assumption that household expenditures constitute gendered terrain:

> Across a wide range of cultures, empirical studies have revealed gender differentials in expenditure (citing Haddad *et al*. 1997; Lundberg *et al*. 1997; Browning and Bonke 2006; Doss 2006). Women, compared to men, tend to spend a higher proportion of income under their control on goods such as food, education and health care that enhance the well-being and

capabilities of children (citing Thomas 1993; Haddad *et al*. 1997; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2000, 5-6).

They concluded, among others, that while the incidence of indirect taxes showed no explicit gender bias in their sample, "some implicit gender biases may exist in some countries for specific commodities that are essential for meeting basic needs, providing care, and reducing women's unpaid work burdens" (47).

Multiple rates, however, are not encouraged by the IMF as they are deemed to complicate administration. The IMF stated that it would create "classification disputes and increasing compliance costs" that can somehow undermine the effectiveness of revenue collection from VAT. The Fund further asserts that exemptions foster unfair redistribution favouring the rich who can purchase more of these goods in absolute terms and thus accrue more benefits (International Monetary Fund, Revenue Mobilization in Developing Countries 2011).

The choice over which goods and services should not enjoy preferential consumption tax rates is a gendered decision as well and reflects gender bias. Sanitary napkins and tampons for example are not considered essentials in certain countries such as India where they are levied a 14% Goods and Services Tax. Poor and low-income women who cannot afford these 'luxury items' have resorted to using unsafe alternatives such as cloth or ash (Shetty).

Certain excise taxes, or what some specifically refer to as 'sin taxes', are also levied as means to counter the regressive impacts of VAT. Imposed on items considered as luxuries and non-essentials such as cigarettes and alcohol, and on activities like gambling, they are deemed progressive because the tax will presumably fall on those with higher incomes. There is a resulting implicit bias against men who largely consume these products but this is generally considered justifiable, even desirable because they dis-incentivize socially harmful behaviour. However, such excise taxes could also negatively affect women, particularly when they have little or no household bargaining power and end up additionally burdened by having to further stretch household budgets to accommodate such expenses (Capraro).

Conclusions and initial recommendations

Arguably, revenues from VAT have risen (in part due to higher rates), but overall revenue collection has remained low and resources are still inadequate for public expenditure. This means that using VAT is not necessarily more efficient, but has shifted the burden of who bears the heaviest revenue-raising effort, with typically regressive and gender-unequal results that are particularly disadvantageous to women.

VAT must also be examined alongside overarching policy advice for developing countries, such as attracting foreign investment and liberalizing trade, which underpin the erosion of revenues from hefty cuts in corporate income taxes and trade tariffs. As raised by Aizenman and Jinjarak, these could actually have contributed to narrowing the fiscal base of developing countries – a condition that is at odds with the increasing push for VAT to reach as broad a base as possible.

Several gender and human rights issues have emerged in the course of implementation, casting even more doubt on claims that the difficulty in implementing VAT will eventually be worth the effort. A continuing criticism of VAT is its inherent regressivity; as the examples cited in this paper affirm, the tax burden inevitably fell heavily on low income groups as compared to the more well-off. Even with exemptions and zero-rating measures that generally made the VAT structure more equitable, lessen negative impacts on the poor, some regressivity often still remained. Significantly, strengthening progressive income taxes no longer seems to be in the picture as proponents like the IMF insist on VAT as the money-maker developing countries need. It would seem that the poor in their large numbers who lie beyond the tax net and cannot be directly taxed are being purposively targeted through VAT.

VAT has further been shown to be far from gender-neutral; in truth, because of the gendered nature of consumption, it contributes to gender discrimination. Indirect tax incidence (measured on the basis of consumption) on non-VAT exempt food commodities turned out to weigh heaviest on poor women. Low income and lack of assets such as land were also found contributory to higher indirect tax burdens on women. Clearly, law and policy and the institutional arrangements and processes around them, including those on tax, tightly intersect with gender. Thus, deciding which goods should be levied excise taxes, exempted and/or zero-rated are gendered decisions, which reveal gender-based assumptions and indicate where biases lie.

Further research on the implications and consequences of using VAT as a major instrument for expanding domestic resource mobilization is clearly needed. For instance, much ground has yet to be covered on VAT's impacts on the informal sector, where large numbers of women congregate. Facing many forms of economic and social vulnerability, women in the informal sector are among the hardest hit by VAT through their purchases of basic goods from formal enterprises. It is also asserted that VAT is self-executing and indeed appears to be corruption-proof. This warrants deeper examination not only of tax fraud as a legal issue but as matter of injustice to the majority of low and middle-income consumers who inescapably pay VAT. Another area of inquiry could delve deeper into combining exemptions with other mechanisms such as VAT refunds for low income groups to further reduce regressivity. Moreover, we should look closer at maximizing the steering function of taxation. This can take the form of designing a VAT with well-targeted gender-equality outcomes in mind, specifically in helping shape attitudes and behaviour towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work that women continue to heavily render.

Finally, a counter discourse must be mounted more vigorously and comprehensively on strengthening progressive income taxation especially on corporations and wealthy individuals, and curbing the very practices of tax dodging that is causing resource erosion in developing countries, instead of insisting on inequitable and gender-discriminatory measures such as VAT.

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