

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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DHAKA SUNDAY JANUARY 19, 2020, MAGH 5, 1426 BS

Fees first, service optional

We demand account of money collected from us

If this was done by a private firm, charges of fraud or collection of money under false pretences would have been brought against them and, who knows, those responsible would have already been in jail. However, when it comes to the action of a government body and if its promises are never fulfilled—and if the money collected on the basis of those promises is not accounted for—then, nobody faces the wrath of the law.

The case in point involves Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). In 2012, it introduced what is popularly called Digital Number Plate with a promise that it would install an automatic tracking device, along with a new number plate, which would enable the relevant authority to track every car, round the clock, against theft. It would also permit them to determine which vehicle was to blame for road accidents, thereby assisting the law enforcement. It was hoped that if every driver knew that they were under the scanner of the law enforcement authorities, the overall safety of our roads would dramatically improve.

With this promise, payments were collected from each vehicle owner to the tune of Tk 560 crores in four years. Well, the number plates came, so did the tracking devices, but the system was never put in place with the result that our cars, trucks, motorbikes and three wheelers remain just as unsafe as they were before this money was collected.

So what can we say other than that the public was duped? To top it all, the authorities never bothered to inform us what happened to the project, why it was not implemented and when, if ever, we can see it put into place. Equally important is the question: what happened to our money?

We thank the BRTA chairman for at least having the moral courage to admit that “people were not getting the service they expected.” However, his statement that the BRTA will “start looking for donors” to revive the plan is causing us to worry even more. Why do we need donors? Didn’t we already pay the money—and that, too, years ago—for this very purpose?

The above instance is a good example as to why people lose confidence in government institutions and why they feel cheated over and over again as promises are seldom fulfilled even after the public is forced to dish out money for those. We urge the ACC to look into the matter.

Pedestrians jaywalking through busy highway

When will we develop a strong sense of civic duty?

A photo series published in this paper on January 18 shows pedestrians jaywalking through the busy Dhaka-Chattogram highway near Jatrabari where, only last Thursday, two people were killed in a road crash. Even though a footbridge is only about a hundred metres away, the pedestrians were seen navigating through a narrow gap in the median, putting not only their own lives at risk, but also that of their children who were accompanying them. We are simply at a loss to understand such reckless behaviour on the part of our citizens.

We strongly believe that our policymakers and law enforcement agencies should be held accountable for the loss of lives on our roads and highways, and consistently urged them to take necessary measures to ensure safer roads through our reports, op-eds and editorials. However, some responsibility must fall on the pedestrians and ordinary citizens, too, who are keen on breaking the law when no one’s looking—be it jaywalking, flouting traffic rules or driving recklessly—which only goes to aggravate an already failing flailing system. It is truly unfortunate that in the 47 years of independence, we have not been able to develop a strong sense of civic duty; we are eager to point fingers at others but rarely do so at ourselves, for our own mistakes and failures.

It is our belief that if every individual takes cognizance of their individual safety as well as that of others, it would go a long way towards establishing some semblance of sanity in our otherwise chaotic metropolis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Use Sonali bag instead of polythene

Polythene is harmful to the environment as well as people’s health. It contributes to the pollution of water, soil and environment. Among the many hazards, it is notorious for seeping into the soil and releasing harmful toxic chemicals, which, when consumed by animals, often result in death. Considering the adverse impacts of its use, about 61 countries around the world including China, France, India and Denmark have already banned it.

Bangladesh too banned it in 2002; however, polythene is still widely used in the country, despite repeated warnings by the experts. It’s time we abandoned polythene for good and resorted to healthy alternatives such as the Sonali Bag, which is made of jute and eco-friendly. It is durable, biodegradable and 100 percent compostable; additionally, it has very low CO2 and water footprint. The introduction of the Sonali Bag will help reduce the pollution caused by polythene and also rid the country of its dependency on this dangerous material.

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Dhaka’s ‘coordination’ problem

A thorn in the side of city governments

ASHEKUR RAHMAN

TO offer better city services to the inhabitants of Dhaka, past governments have stressed on the “coordination” of activities of all the city service providers—as many as 50—through forming committees. In the last 30 years, this approach has frustrated all elected mayors, including Annisul Huq, the late mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation. This coordination approach began during the tenure of Mohammad Hanif, who served as mayor of the erstwhile undivided Dhaka City Corporation from 1994 to 2002.

As the residents of Dhaka (North and South) brace themselves for the upcoming mayoral elections set to be held on January 30, a familiar scene is playing out: they are being regaled with the fairy-tale stories of the candidates. Pledges guaranteeing all basic city services are being thrown around, without much detail on the magical solution of working out the city’s intricate problems through the existing “coordination committee”. Undeniably, there is a risk of repeating the blame game and attributing lacklustre performances to the coordination problem once the elections are over, since there is little or no consensus—let alone any dialogue—on the existing urban local government management structure and how to effectively reform the service delivery mechanism.

Hanif wanted all relevant service delivery and regulatory agencies of the government to be brought under the authority of the city mayor. That time, the then government allowed a coordination committee to be chaired by the minister for local government and co-chaired by the mayor, but this arrangement soon fell through. A similar situation arose during the tenure of his successor, Sadeque Hossain Khoka, when a high-powered coordination committee was established under the chairmanship of the mayor (with the status of a cabinet minister). It was formed with over 30 heads of agencies and five civil society representatives. Again, the committee could not work effectively, and at the request of the mayor, the committee’s responsibility was shifted to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) with the principal secretary to the prime minister acting as chief coordinator on behalf of the elected mayor. The system was discontinued with the change of government, and coordination, even in present times, remains a very critical issue in city governance, not just for Dhaka, but also for other cities.

The result has been that, after 30 years since the formation of Dhaka City

Corporation, Dhaka is globally indexed as one of the least liveable cities. Dhaka is becoming an unequal city with hardly any noticeable evidence of planned efforts. Considering Dhaka’s economic growth in the national and global context, many experts are of the opinion that sustainable development could not be achieved without a decentralised urban governance structure with provisions for further redistribution of decision-making powers and resources to the city authorities. Experts have cited lack of good urban governance for Dhaka’s persistent problems. This includes key indicators such as participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, authority, rule of law, decentralisation, coordination, efficiency, and leadership.



Elected representatives have to struggle with the limited power and jurisdiction of city corporations in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Do the city residents believe the mayors and their aides in Dhaka (North and South) enjoy the right amount of authority? What are the alternatives when there are more than 50 organisations involved in providing city services? Do the residents know who runs this city? Prior to 1994, the city corporations were managed by mayors appointed by the government. In case of Dhaka, often the minister in charge of local government was given the additional responsibility of carrying out mayoral duties. Even now, after the formulation of an umbrella act (The Local Government Act 2009) for all city corporations, the Ministry of Local Government Division (LGD) takes care of the allocations and other duties and deliverables.

In terms of urban local government, the Dhaka North and South City Corporations do not enjoy adequate administrative

decentralisation is also very limited. All the city corporations are comprised of wards, but the wards do not enjoy any worthwhile financial power and lack human resource capacity. The ward councillors have to address the demands of a large constituency (compared to other local government tiers) almost singlehandedly. Furthermore, the reserved seats for female councillors do not have any portfolio of significance.

Globally, the function of the city corporation involves a complex combination of many crucial services that are provided by a wide range of organisations: government, autonomous and semi-government bodies as well as the private sector, civil society, community, and also increasingly the development partners and international agencies. All these different types of organisations and institutions have their roles to play in

establishing a functional, efficient, and progressive urban governance system. However, the primary responsibility should lie with the city authority, i.e. the mayor and his/her leadership. Good urban governance demands effective leadership of the elected representatives of the city corporation, along with the participation of municipal officials, the central government agencies at the local level, the private sector, NGOs, civil society and, finally, the people.

Governance arrangements for some of the world’s largest and fastest-growing cities vary from region to region. In some parts of the urban world, especially in Western Europe and South America, a broader coalition of city governments, private sector, and civil society actors are increasingly having their say in determining municipal futures. In others, most notably the US, India, and China, the central and federal government or state authorities seem to have kept their grip on the governance of cities. Bangladesh is also an example of this latter category.

Only a handful of city governments in the developed and developing countries have control over their metropolitan areas, reflecting different institutional arrangements with political boundaries. International experience indicates that the key to realising the goal of sustainable urban development is good governance, especially when it is happening purely through the local urban governments. Therefore, adopting supporting steps is crucial to devolve authority and power from the centre to the city corporation authorities and strengthen their institutional ability to interact effectively with the residents and meet their needs as well as redress their grievances. Without having a single authoritative platform, which we lack in Bangladesh, providing quality city services is simply impossible.

With the present trend of urbanisation, many of the changes taking place in the two parts of Dhaka—including social, economic, technological, environmental, or political—will be hugely disruptive in the coming days. Future trends point to increasing complexities surrounding cities and an uncertainty about the future. Successful urban governance will require bold and capable leadership and the capacity for adaptability and resilience to address the challenges that we face and to seize current and possible future opportunities as well. Are the imminent city leaders and policymakers ready to take the bold and decisive steps necessary to secure a more prosperous future for our city?

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The truth about the Trump economy



Donald Trump?

AS the world’s business elites trek to Davos for their annual gathering, people should be asking a simple question: have they overcome their infatuation with US President

Two years ago, a few rare corporate leaders were concerned about climate change, or upset at Trump’s misogyny and bigotry. Most, however, were celebrating the president’s tax cuts for billionaires and corporations and looking forward to his efforts to deregulate the economy. That would allow businesses to pollute the air more, get more Americans hooked on opioids, entice more children to eat their diabetes-inducing foods, and engage in the sort of financial shenanigans that brought on the 2008 crisis.

Today, many corporate bosses are still talking about the continued GDP growth and record stock prices. But neither GDP nor the Dow is a good measure of economic performance. Neither tells us what’s happening to ordinary citizens’ living standards or anything about sustainability. In fact, US economic performance over the past four years is Exhibit A in the indictment against relying on these indicators.

To get a good reading on a country’s economic health, start by looking at the health of its citizens. If they are happy and prosperous, they will be healthy and live longer. Among developed countries, America sits at the bottom in this regard. US life expectancy, already relatively low, fell in each of the first two years of Trump’s presidency, and in 2017, midlife mortality reached its highest rate since World War II. This is not a surprise, because no president has worked harder to make sure that more Americans lack health insurance. Millions have lost their coverage, and the uninsured rate has risen, in just two years, from 10.9 percent to 13.7 percent.

One reason for declining life expectancy in America is what Anne Case and Nobel laureate economist Angus Deaton call deaths of despair, caused by alcohol, drug overdoses, and suicide. In 2017 (the most recent year for which good data are available), such deaths stood at almost four times their 1999 level.

The only time I have seen anything

like these declines in health (outside of war or epidemics) was when I was chief economist of the World Bank and found out that mortality and morbidity data confirmed what our economic indicators suggested about the dismal state of the post-Soviet Russian economy.

Trump may be a good president for the top 1 percent—and especially for the top 0.1 percent—but he has not been good for everyone else. If fully implemented, the 2017 tax cut will result in tax increases for most households in the second, third, and fourth income quintiles.

Given tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the ultrarich and corporations, it should come as no surprise that there was no significant change in the median US household’s disposable income between 2017 and 2018 (again, the most recent

regulations that have passed stringent cost-benefit analyses. The air will be less breathable, the water less drinkable, and the planet more subject to climate change. In fact, losses related to climate change have already reached new highs in the US, which has suffered more property damage than any other country—reaching some 1.5 percent of GDP in 2017.

The tax cuts were supposed to spur a new wave of investment. Instead, they triggered an all-time record binge of share buybacks—some USD 800 billion in 2018—by some of America’s most profitable companies, and led to record peacetime deficits (almost USD 1 trillion in fiscal 2019) in a country supposedly near full employment. And even with weak investment, the US had to borrow massively abroad: the most recent data



show foreign borrowing at nearly USD 500 billion a year, with an increase of more than 10 percent in America’s net indebtedness position in one year alone.

Likewise, Trump’s trade wars, for all their sound and fury, have not reduced the US trade deficit, which was one-quarter higher in 2018 than it was in 2016. The 2018 goods deficit was the largest on record. Even the deficit in trade with China was up almost a quarter from 2016. The US did get a new North American trade agreement, without the provisions raising drug prices that the pharmaceutical companies wanted, and with better labour and environmental provisions. Trump, a self-proclaimed master deal maker, lost on almost

every front in his negotiations with congressional Democrats, resulting in a slightly improved trade arrangement.

And despite Trump’s vaunted promises to bring manufacturing jobs back to the US, the increase in manufacturing employment is still lower than it was under his predecessor, Barack Obama, once the post-2008 recovery set in, and is still markedly below its pre-crisis level. Even the unemployment rate, at a 50-year low, masks economic fragility. The employment rate for working-age males and females, while rising, has increased less than during the Obama recovery, and is still significantly below that of other developed countries. The pace of job creation is also markedly slower than it was under Obama.

Again, the low employment rate is not a surprise, not least because unhealthy people can’t work. Moreover, those on disability benefits, in prison—the US incarceration rate has increased more than six-fold since 1970, with some two million people currently behind bars—or so discouraged that they are not actively seeking jobs are not counted as “unemployed.” But, of course, they are not employed. Nor is it a surprise that a country that doesn’t provide affordable childcare or guarantee family leave would have lower female employment—adjusted for population, more than ten percentage points lower—than other developed countries.

Even judging by GDP, the Trump economy falls short. Last quarter’s growth was just 2.1 percent, far less than the 4 percent, 5 percent, or even 6 percent Trump promised to deliver, and even less than the 2.4 percent average of Obama’s second term. That is a remarkably poor performance considering the stimulus provided by the USD 1 trillion deficit and ultra-low interest rates. This is not an accident, or just a matter of bad luck: Trump’s brand is uncertainty, volatility, and prevarication, whereas trust, stability, and confidence are essential for growth. So is equality, according to the International Monetary Fund.

So, Trump deserves failing grades not just on essential tasks like upholding democracy and preserving our planet. He should not get a pass on the economy, either.

Joseph E Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics, is a University Professor at Columbia University and Chief Economist at the Roosevelt Institute. His most recent book is “People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent.”

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