

Only 4.5 percent of special loans for migrants disbursed so far

The authorities must ensure greater accessibility and efficient use

SINCE the onset of the pandemic, the fate of migrant workers from Bangladesh have hung in the balance. Time and again, we have seen reports of our migrant workers struggling to survive in host countries, or being forced to return to Bangladesh after losing their jobs or failing to renew their visas/contracts. According to data from the Expatriates' Welfare Ministry, about 2.72 lakh Bangladeshi expatriates returned home between April 1 and November 11 this year after the coronavirus struck.

Since their return, there have been growing concerns about how these migrants, whose remittances have hugely contributed to our economy over the years, would support themselves and their families in an already depressed economy. Therefore, the decision to offer a Tk 200 crore special loan package for coronavirus-affected returnee migrants' reintegration, allocated by the Wage Earners' Welfare Board and disbursed through the Probashi Kallyan Bank, was welcomed across the board. Even then, experts warned that this amount was woefully inadequate given the far-reaching impact of the fallout on households and communities dependent on these migrants' incomes.

Against this backdrop, it is extremely frustrating to find out that so far, the Probashi Kallyan Bank has disbursed around Tk 9 crore from this Tk 200 crore fund, and till November 20, the disbursed amount was only about Tk 4.6 crore. Experts have cited the terms and conditions of the loans as one of the reasons behind the poor response, saying the four percent interest rate for a loan up to Tk 5 lakh is too high considering the financial condition of the returnees. Besides, the grace period against loans in most ventures is limited to one month only, which means the returnees have to start paying instalments almost immediately after taking the loan. Migrant rights organisations have also found that government support mechanisms for the returnees—like how one should prepare a proposal to get a loan from the special fund—were unavailable at the upazila level.

It is unacceptable that our authorities have thrown our migrant workers in the deep end like this. A survey from BRAC suggests that almost 87 percent of returnee migrants have been left without income opportunities—especially when their labour is one of the driving forces behind our progress towards eventually becoming a middle-income country. Can we truly be proud of our achievements if the workers who make up the backbone of our economy are living hand to mouth during a time of crisis? The authorities must step up and ensure that there is greater accessibility to these finances, as well as training and support to returnee migrants to ensure that they are actually able to put these loans to good use. In the long run, we must also enter into negotiations with host countries and explore the option of re-migration, which, according to an IOM study, is the preferred option for the majority of returnee migrants.

Interruption in oxygen supply averted in public hospitals

Govt's prompt action commendable

WE commend the government for taking immediate action to import oxygen from India as the country's major oxygen supplier plant went out of order due to a technical glitch recently. Reportedly, Linde Bangladesh Limited, a multinational company, provides the government hospitals with 90 percent of their daily demand of liquid oxygen, which is 100 tonnes. However, on December 11, the plant, situated in Narayanganj's Rupganj, went out of service following a technical problem. Its fallout could have been disastrous for the hospitals but, thankfully, prompt action by the authorities to bring oxygen from India averted the crisis. Linde Bangladesh is now bringing in life-saving oxygen from India using tankers and delivering it to the hospitals on a temporary basis.

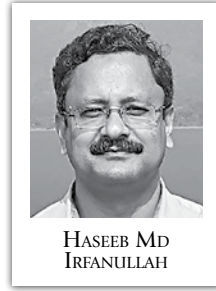
Uninterrupted oxygen supply is extremely crucial during this time of the pandemic, as lives of critical coronavirus patients depend on continuous oxygen supply. According to DGHS officials, the number of critical Covid-19 patients seeking oxygen support at hospitals has been increasing as winter set in. Unfortunately, the majority of our public hospitals and health complexes still do not have a proper oxygen supply system. Only a few district level hospitals have a central oxygen supply system, while others use oxygen cylinders for emergency situation. And there are still many hospitals that have no oxygen supply system at all.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, health experts have been urging the government and the public hospitals to install a centralised oxygen supply system. But only a few of them took any step to do so. While with cylinders a patient can be given oxygen at the maximum rate of six litres per minute, a central oxygen supply system can provide much more oxygen in an uninterrupted manner. That is why it is essential to have such a system in every hospital.

Coming back to the problem of oxygen supply by Linde Bangladesh Limited, we think they have managed the situation quite skilfully for the time being. What they must ensure now is that the supply from India does not get disrupted. They should repair the plant as quickly as possible and start supplying oxygen to our hospitals from their plant. While they do so, the government should also make some alternative arrangements for getting emergency oxygen supply, just to avoid any future crisis.

2020 has been a year of nature-based solutions.

So what awaits us in 2021?



HASEEB MD
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IN 2020, Nature-based Solutions, or NbS, has emerged as a much-talked-about environmental concept in Bangladesh. While the Covid-19 pandemic has put the whole world in turmoil, we do have other challenges to tackle—climate emergency, disaster risks, food and water insecurities, extreme poverty, and unprecedented biodiversity loss. In simple terms, NbS are the actions we take with the help of nature to overcome these societal challenges.

When we protect our ecosystems like forests and wetlands, sustainably manage their resources, restore them when these are in bad shape, or create a new one to get its services, we practice NbS. But we perform these activities keeping in mind one or more societal challenges, like climate change. And, most importantly, we design and implement our activities in a way that they improve our wellbeing and also give biodiversity benefits.

So, we can see that NbS is not a completely new idea. It is rather a recent attempt to bring together different existing nature-based activities and approaches—like establishing protected areas like the Sundarbans, creating a "green belt" along our coastline since 1965, participatory management of Hakaluki haor, or ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change in Satkhira—under one umbrella called NbS.

As I look back now, I see three milestones generating strong interest in NbS in Bangladesh in 2020.

First, NbS activities in Bangladesh now have a go-to platform—the NbS Bangladesh web portal (www.nbsbangladesh.info)—thanks to the collaboration between the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and the University of Oxford, UK. This portal has created a good opportunity to bring together cases and documents capturing Bangladesh's long NbS experience in the form of peer-reviewed research papers, grey literature, and relevant policy and planning instruments.

The ICCCAD-Oxford initiative has also established the NbS Bangladesh Network. By being part of this network, interested individuals and organisations can take forward the NbS conversation in Bangladesh, share experiences, and undertake joint actions.

The second milestone is an improved understanding of NbS in Bangladesh through discussions and publications. The first webinar on NbS was organised by ICCCAD in May, giving the audience an opportunity to learn about NbS and how to harness their benefits. The American Center's NbS webinar provided a platform for sharing NbS experiences from experts from Bangladesh Forest

Department, UNDP, and the Center for Natural Resource Studies. The "NbS Digital Dialogues" organised by the University of Oxford was this year's largest global NbS event. In the session on people's participation in NbS, Bangladesh government's 20-year effort to sustainably manage Tanguar haor was showcased, which was later captured in an op-ed by *The Daily Star* in August.

The ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis started its fourth year on August 25, 2020. An opinion piece in *The Daily Star* highlighted the nature-based actions that different agencies were taking in the highly degraded camp areas through plantation, hilly slope and stream bank stabilisation, and wetland creation, for example.

In September, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published a brief entitled "Rethinking

Just before the Covid-19 lockdown, on March 15, a meeting was held at the Bangladesh Planning Commission with ICCCAD to discuss how NbS could be integrated in the country's planning processes, such as in the Eighth Five-Year Plan. An analysis presented in that discussion showed that Bangladesh was well ahead in appreciating nature-based actions and approaches as seen in the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP, 2009), the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2015. Among others, the participants recommended inclusion of NbS in government project formulation documents, like the Development Project Proforma (DPP),

two webinars to discuss the experiences, challenges, and opportunities they share on nature-based solutions and approaches to fight climate change.

Despite the restrictions and limitations imposed by the pandemic, it has been a promising year for raising the profile of NbS as a concept in Bangladesh. So, what awaits us in 2021?

There are a number of events already lined up to continue the NbS conversation. The first Gobeshona Global Conference (January 18–24, 2021) will have NbS as one of its central themes. The University of Oxford is organising a NbS conference in July where Bangladesh's experience is expected to be highlighted. Given that NbS is one of the core themes of the COP26, we can expect more activities in Bangladesh in this regard leading up to November 2021.

In terms of creating new knowledge of NbS, a number of ongoing research projects are expected to give us more understanding of and insight into Bangladesh's NbS, once these are complete. We may also expect the NbS Bangladesh Network to gain further momentum and contribute towards evidence-informed policy discussions.

Regarding broader policy and strategic planning scopes, we believe the Eighth Five-Year Plan will maintain its focus on nature-based approaches as it did in the Seventh Five-Year Plan. The projects to be designed under the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 will include NbS, as discussed on March 15 at the Bangladesh Planning Commission. Bangladesh is currently preparing the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) with support from the Green Climate Fund (GCF). Given the country's long-term commitment and experience with nature to protect its people from climate change impacts, NbS should be one of the core adaptation approaches of the "Bangladesh NAP" due in May 2021. We also expect that the revised NDC, to be submitted to the UNFCCC by December 31, will keep NbS as the core actions as Bangladesh updates its targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2025.

While we show our enthusiasm in using nature to solve our problems, we must be careful not to interpret the NbS concept wrongly. NbS means creating forests with diverse species and maintain biodiversity, not planting the same species mile after mile. NbS must empower the indigenous and local people and engage them in their design and implementation, and must not be injected from the outside. NbS is not the ultimate solution to climate change by reducing carbon from our air, however. Without rapidly decarbonising our economy and adopting clean energy strategies, it is impossible to survive the climate crisis. As we continue the conversation in 2021, we must be careful about possible misapplication and abuse of the NbS concept.

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PHOTO:
PHILIP GAIN

Nature: A Pathway towards Sustainable Development?" Written by two Bangladeshi environmentalists, this article showed that NbS is not only about climate action (SDG 13) or biodiversity conservation (SDGs 14 and 15), but also about improving urban resilience (SDG 11), community empowerment and ensuring gender equality (SDGs 1, 2 and 5), promoting sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12), and achieving economic growth (SDG 8).

Young environmentalists working in different research organisations showed increasing interest in NbS. They tried to understand different aspects of it, like the role of indigenous knowledge in NbS, or NbS as an alternative development pathway for Bangladesh, and shared their understanding and thoughts on different platforms.

The third milestone took the NbS conversation to a higher level so that our policies and practices appreciate the benefits of ecosystem-based actions.

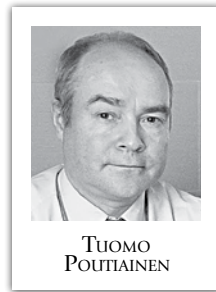
and establishing a NbS database to guide planners and practitioners to choose appropriate nature-based solutions and include them in development projects and programmes.

In August, the ICCCAD and the University of Oxford analysed the NbS scenarios in Bangladesh from the perspectives of knowledge, practice, policy, and planning. Their policy brief, entitled "A Roadmap for Nature-based Solutions in Bangladesh: Promises and Challenges", gives us a comprehensive direction towards nature-based actions for Bangladesh.

The UK holds the presidency of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) to be held in November 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland. The UK has long been a partner of Bangladesh in fighting climate change, which has gained further momentum in 2020. On December 8 and 9, the UK-Bangladesh Climate Partnership Forum brought together experts, practitioners, and politicians from both countries in

Why every migrant worker should travel with a 'skills passport'

The multiple benefits of skilling, reskilling, upskilling and skills recognition for overseas workers



TUOMO
POUTAINEN

DURING the early months of the Covid-19 global pandemic, almost 400,000 migrant workers were forced to return home, not knowing when the crisis would end or when they would return to their jobs.

Each year, millions of Bangladeshi men and women travel afar to work as masons, plumbers, carpenters, drivers, gardeners, cleaners and vendors. Almost all leave these shores without any formal recognition of their skills or experience. To make matters worse, they return home, as many did in April/May of 2020, without any further recognition of the considerable skills and experiences acquired overseas. This not only leaves them unable to get good jobs in Bangladesh, but also leaves Bangladesh unable to capitalise on this pool of skilled human capital.

According to the World Bank, migrant workers remit over USD 15 billion each year to their families to buy food and other essential goods. What is often overlooked is how much they contribute—in tens of billions—to the GDP of the country of destination.

Migration is a key defining feature of this country's economy, with tens of millions seeking overseas job opportunities over the past 50 years. The theme for the International Migrants Day this year was "reimagining the future of mobility". The future of mobility for

migrant workers must be envisioned better.

This migrant workforce has the potential to make significant contributions to Bangladesh's economic development by investing their hard-earned savings in the country, as well as monetising human and social capital acquired abroad, such as new skills and competencies. However, without any recognition of their improved skills or any formal certification—even after several years of good international work

migrant workers too to help them obtain formal recognition of the skills acquired through hands-on experience and informal employment/training overseas. The NSP is an invaluable document for jobseekers when it comes to finding jobs and keeping tabs on future reskilling, retooling and/or upskilling. It's also a godsend for employers looking to hire certified, skilled and experienced labour.

The ILO and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MOEWOE) is now

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experience—many remain stuck with low wages, in low-skilled jobs with low status.

A recent study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that 60 percent of migrant workers who have recently returned home expressed a desire to upgrade and seek recognition of their newly-acquired skills. In fact, 75 percent said that once overseas working opportunities resumed, they would prefer to work in a country where their skills would be justly recognised and rewarded.

Sri Lanka offers a good example of skills recognition wherein the government, in partnership with the ILO and local employers' groups, offers all skilled workers a National Skills Passport (NSP). The NSP is offered to returnee

exploring ways to introduce a similar scheme in Bangladesh, one that will help employers find the right person for the right job with the right skills. It also benefits the government by helping to streamline migrant workers and returnee workers by skills-type and bridge gaps in the labour market. It also helps the government with long-term skills planning for the economy and future employment creation.

The government of Bangladesh currently uses the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) scheme to measure and certify a worker's skillsets. The RPL system was introduced as part of the 2011 National Skills Development Policy to help recognise the evolving, informal

and on-the-job skills gained by workers. While many Bangladesh-based workers have acquired RPL certification, millions of migrant workers and returnees remain unaware of the system or its multiple benefits in terms of increased earning power and access to better-paid jobs at home and overseas.

ILO Bangladesh is now working closely with the MOEWOE and Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) to certify returnee migrant workers for their reintegration and re-migration. The country is making steady progress in establishing and implementing a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system. According to BTEB, there are 411 RPL centres dotted around the country, and they have certified the skills of 41,560 workers, including 15,000 migrant workers.

The MOEWOE is now looking to strengthen and expand RPL and national skills' passports for Bangladeshi workers across Asia. The Bangladesh High Commission in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has already taken the lead and introduced RPL for migrant workers in the kingdom. The plan is to now roll out the scheme to dozens of destination countries, which have high numbers of Bangladeshi workers.

A migrant workforce that is skilled, respected and certified has the potential to be one of the country's most valuable financial assets. Ultimately, the more these decent hard-working men and women earn, the more their families, and their beloved homeland, will prosper.

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