

# Together towards better environment

*"Environmentalism sees humanity as a biological species tightly dependent on the natural world. Many of the world's vital resources are about to be exhausted, its atmospheric chemistry deteriorating and human populations have already grown dangerously large. Natural ecosystems, the wellspring of a healthful environment, are being irreversibly degraded."* — E. O. Wilson

ENVIRONMENT degradation has taken its toll on the standard of living of the people in Bangladesh. Omnipresent levels of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and other harmful gases emitted from motorised vehicles and industrial establishments, the way garbage is being disposed and later burnt, the way lakes and low-lying areas are being filled up with wastes and high-rises, the way trees and hills are being cut off randomly, all contribute to an unhealthy environment. This dramatically lowers life expectancy and has a dire effect on the overall performance of a person. A breath of polluted air is hardly a good way to start the day. This is what happens every morning. And in this case, the morning does show the day. As the day proceeds, the number of cars on the streets increases.

Dhaka's alarming level of pollution is evident from the emergence of an increasing number of masked commuters. This touch of novelty on the capital's face is actually the tell-tale sign of the dire situation of air pollution. Such high density of pollution exists because of the presence of so many cars plying the streets. In relation to the road space available, the number of vehicles are too many and, as unplanned as they are, on the rise. Buses, trucks and other such vehicles may be considered to be economical because by using an equivalent amount of fuel and space they carry many passengers, while cars carry up to a maximum of four to five people. However, the traffic system being such, the buses appear to be causing the maximum output of pollution. The rickshaws may not add to the pollution, but what they do is slow the pace of traffic. The motor vehicles have to slow down, which means more fuel consumption and more gas emission.

The next problem that arises is noise pollution. In the Bangladeshi context, noise seems to be no problem at all. Whereas car horns signify a form of scolding in developed nations, honking is basically a necessity here. In fact, even institutional driving lessons include lessons about where and when to use the car horn. Loud music, noisy parties and other such nuisances do manage to aggravate people, but these activities are hardly called 'out of the book'. The standard of living here is so low that this is considered trivial. People have to think about the big problems first and then notice such trivialities — but this noise terrorism is formidable enough to cause hearing impairment, hypertension and numerous other afflictions in those repeatedly exposed to it. Noise pollution, however, is not easily defined. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that in some ways it is different from other forms of pollution. Noise is transient, once the pollution stops, the environment is free of it.

Lack of proper waste management adds more negative impacts.

Garbage is one of the major problems in the city. It is the garbage dumps that are home to the many kinds of diseases. They are the breeding places of mosquitoes, flies and many other known and unknown insects, all of whom contribute to disease transmission. According to news reports, 35 thousand tonnes of solid waste is generated each day, of which only 42 per cent is collected by the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). The rest remain on roadsides, low-lying areas and open drains. The highest component of solid waste is organic food waste. Other components are plastics, paper, metal, glass, construction material and cloths. Therefore, garbage makes many of diseases that are prevalent here possible.

Water quality degradation is mainly because of poor sanitation, mismanagement of industrial effluents, and the way pesticides are used in order to kill mosquito larvae and the like. In the 1970s and 1980s the government, in co-operation with United Nations Children's Fund and other multilateral agencies, embarked on a massive nationwide programme of ensuring safe drinking water. Over a period of nearly 25 years, the Bangladeshi government, with technical and financial assistance from the donor agencies, set about a massive programme of installing deep tube-wells throughout the country.

Four million tube-wells were sunk. A motivational campaign was set forth in order to motivate the villagers to switch from using surface water to ground water from the underground aquifers. While conceiving and implementing the massive tube-well programme, planners overlooked the possibility of the naturally occurring arsenic deposits that could contaminate the subterranean water sources. To the satisfaction of all concerned, Bangladesh achieved a near-perfect target of providing safe water for its people through sinking those hand-pumped wells.

But now, the success story has been reversed. Arsenic contamination in Bangladesh may well be the story of the biggest mass-poisoning in the history of mankind.

solid waste management and air pollution. Poor management of water resources and unresolved issues such as balancing the needs and potential of hydropower, irrigation, and inland fisheries lead to water crises. Dwindling forests, coastal wetlands, and freshwater bodies and poorly managed protected areas, all are part of land degradation. Soil degradation is prevalent in agricultural and range lands. Energy-related damage from the commercial energy sectors and the collection and burning of biomass again leads to air pollution. The impact of global climate change, particularly in low-lying Bangladesh, is of concern because it manages to disrupt habitation and any form of environmental decorum.

The problem is not, however, confined to Bangladesh. In fact, environmental degradation in the South Asian region has been on for many years, induced by the familiar factors of increasing industrial and urban pollution in urban areas and degradation in rural and coastal areas from the unsustainable use of land, forests, and water resources. India shows rising levels of sickness and death from pollution, as well as economic costs attributable to resource degradation of more than five per cent of GDP. Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries in the region are experiencing similar trends, albeit at lower levels.

In the face of these problems, there have been some notable environmental initiatives. Private sector investments in industrial pollution control and common effluent treatment plants are expanding in India, partly in response to private sector ISO incentives and to the voluntary compliance of some larger industries. Cleaner vehicles, such as unleaded gasoline in major Indian cities and compressed natural gas (CNG) in Dhaka, are being introduced. Joint forestry management involving both communities and government in India and Nepal is slowing forest degradation in some of their hill areas, and private plantations are increasing the tree cover in other degraded areas, such as in West Bengal. Investment in renewable energy in India and Sri Lanka, especially wind and small-scale hydro, has been significant. A water treaty between India and Bangladesh has reduced bilateral tensions over allocation rights to the waters of the Ganges, and is helping guarantee minimum flows to Bangladesh during the dry season. This will help restore aquifers, provide needed irrigation water, and maintain sufficient flows to the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove area to reduce the saltwater intrusion that has already started to take place.

But South Asia needs more than isolated environmental initiatives; it needs improved planning and management, which is largely an institutional challenge. But political support for environmental management is sporadic at best, and surfaces mainly in reaction to crises. Experience with stand-alone environmental investments in the region has been mixed due largely to the lack of capacity of environmental "ministries". Therefore, investments should be sectoral, and in collaboration with non-government organisations. In this region, no investment plan can be made by a sole organisation, it is a government agency.

This mainstreaming approach may prove promising because it involves developing environmental capacity in sector ministries and, in the case of India and Pakistan, at the state and local levels. The environmental components of sector investments focus on appropriate policies, good management, and pollution abatement incentives rather than on narrow actions to deal with specific environmental problems.

This approach may also encourage private sector investment and community involvement in addressing pollution problems, and focus the role of government more towards regulatory concerns than investment responsibilities. For example, a strong push to increase the share of private investment in urban and regional infrastructure, ranging from roads to water supply and sanitation to telecommunications. Governments cannot continue to finance all of these investment needs, especially in light of low cost recovery. In industrial pollution control, the practice of the public sector financing the construction of effluent treatment plants may be replaced by private sector solutions. Public awareness of environmental issues is steadily increasing in the region due to NGO activity, the media, activist courts and government education programmes. This increased awareness is fundamental to both improving the effectiveness of government policies and enabling greater decentralisation to local agencies and communities.

Efforts for environment preservation and protection in Bangladesh may include replacement of two-stroke vehicle engine. A decision has been taken in this respect whereby two-stroke engines will be removed in phases over a five-year period and replaced by four-stroke engines. If policies are to be undertaken, they should be modelled along these lines. For example, a recent World Bank project-policy has been emulated to eliminate the TSVs (scooters) within next four years and substituting these with 2,000 buses. If this is true, there is certainly hope.

Strategies that address fisheries research, environmental emergencies, large marine

ecosystems, and coastal zone management in and around the Bay of Bengal would be beneficial to Bangladesh as well as neighbouring countries. Improvement of regional co-operation in the poorest part of South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and eastern India) in water resource management, energy development and trade, and transport and commerce would be beneficial as well.

Major sources and levels of lead exposure in the region have to be identified, as well as the costs of phasing out leaded gasoline. Human health improvements and lessons of experience from other countries in the region have to be made public. One case study, for example, describes in detail the complete phase-out of leaded gasoline in the Slovak Republic. Although it recognises the importance of dealing with all significant sources of lead exposure, the study focuses on lead exposure from exhaust of vehicles using leaded gasoline.

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