

# Better water management for improved livelihood

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WATER is a scarce commodity. It is this reason that makes its management that much more important for all of us. My attention was drawn in this regard last week to two informative and interesting articles -- the first related to equity consideration in water management by Jahiruddin Chowdhury (of the Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET) and the second pertaining to Bangladesh's wetland ecosystems and livelihoods of the poor who depend on them by Mary Renwick and Deepa Joshi (of Winrock International).

As a water activist, the studies assumed special significance for me because they underlined the importance of water in creating socio-economic opportunities. Jahiruddin in particular, has added to the dimension by pointing out how water management projects in Bangladesh have brought economic benefit to one section of the society while causing economic hardships to another section.

Management of water as a commodity is a complex operation. Basin wide planning and non-water activities impacts in their own way not only on the environment and ecosystems but also on sus-

tainable development and 'social prosperity'. This factor consequently generates the need for an integrated approach. It also acquires special significance because proper water management has a significant bearing for public health, energy production, food production, transport, fisheries, agro-processing, forestry and ecosystems -- all related to economic growth and water dependent livelihoods. In this context impartial and non-politicized attention also needs to be given in decision making regarding the needs of low-income vulnerable groups such as marginal farmer, fisherman (who might particularly suffer due to loss of open water fish habitat), boatman etc.

The studies have also correctly pointed out that water management and water supply in Bangladesh is faced with problems in and around urban centers as well as in the hilly regions. Water excellence is especially under threat in urban areas due to pollution of surface water through disposal of urban wastes and industrial effluent. Similarly, there has been decline in water quality in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (which is afflicting the highland population) due to seasoning of timber in the water and leakage of fuel from motor-

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ized engine transports. Such a prevailing situation is totally contrary to the basic assumption that safe-drinking water is a human right and that maintenance of environmental flow and ecosystems are vital for economic development.

Such a scenario clearly raises the question about the effectiveness of the institutional mechanism that is presently in place for the purpose of water management. I believe that there is serious need to examine whether the responsible authorities are being able to suitably address the question of competing water needs that have emerged due to population growth and increased economic activity in both agriculture and industry. There are also the additional points of effective flood control, ensuring suitable navigation, maintaining of morphology, satisfying ecological requirements and preventing salt intrusion.

One hopes that our new political government will

give special priority to water management. We are a deltaic country where our network of rivers, streams, canals and water bodies are not only the bedrock for most of our economic activities but also the source of subsistence food production (for landless people), livestock fodder and medicinal plants. The comparatively poorer sections of the rural community also depend heavily on such water sources for their irrigation needs (required for supplementary home vegetable gardens and 'shifting cultivation' on hill slopes). It is this additional aspect that makes proper water management that much more significant.

A recent seminar convened by the Bangladesh Water Partnership has identified another area which deserves attention. Water engineers and hydrologists reiterated correctly that 'alternate flooding and recession in tidal floodplain performs an important flushing function essential for morphological stability

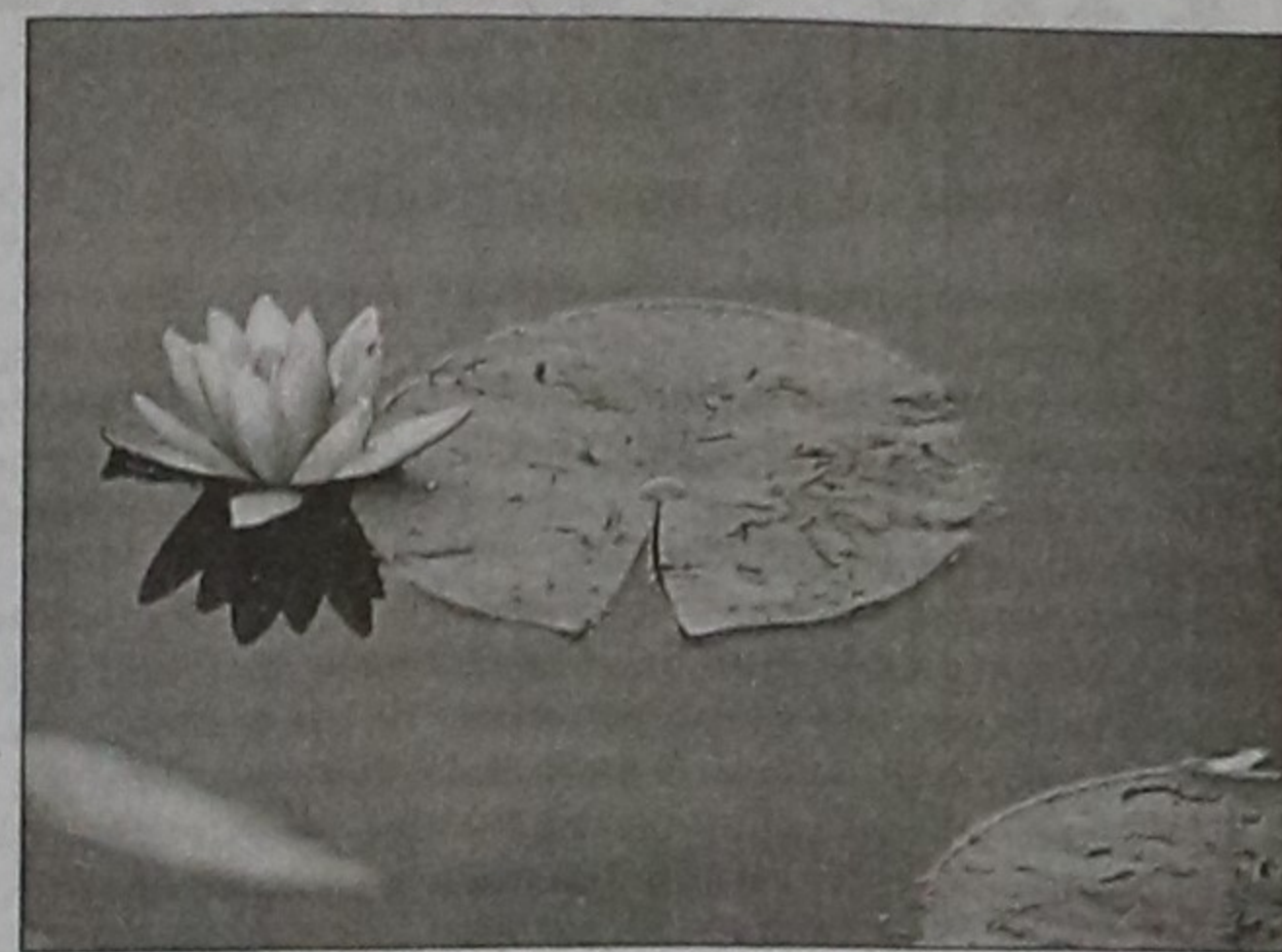
of tidal rivers'. I agree with them that this important function requires the relevant authorities to review our coastal embankment plan and the putting in place of flood control polders that are being constructed to prevent tidal flooding of the tidal floodplain. The present plan appears to have overlooked factors that are now resulting in serious water logging in adjacent areas and causing severe damage to agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock and physical infrastructures.

Our Prime Minister is on record regarding the need to engage the local community more effectively at all levels. In this regard, a special Task Force could be formed consisting of representatives from not only the Ministries of Water, Disaster management and Environment but also from the LGED to examine how our water and ecological resources as well as biodiversity can be best maintained. Local community associations could be organized within the Union local government structure to

monitor ecosystem maintenance (using local knowledge and institutional memory) within that area and to resolve conflict arising from competing use of water for different economic activities.

Such community participation in 'the identification, planning, implementation, operation and maintenance of water management projects' could be an 'essential input' for deciding on necessary management interventions, the promotion of accountability and the development of meaningful solutions to emerging and existing problems. This could relate to formulation and implementation of regulations and guidelines necessary to protect the water regime, water quality, water rights, fish migration pathways (especially for hilsa) and navigation routes consistent with flood cycles and river morphology.

We have to remember that such a co-management approach (within the local government system) has to ensure that local communities have direct control over



the management, utilization and benefits arising out of the use of local resources. Such an approach can then seek to develop linkages between communities and the government at the local, intermediate and national levels.

Renwick and Joshi have pointed out appropriately that such linkages will involve stakeholders at various levels -- often also referred to as 'vertical linkages'. The government will have to achieve the required sustainable vertical linkages in the socio-economic context. This will need placing emphasis on developing equitable local institutions and supporting changes in attitudes and practices among users and government agencies. This might appear to be a difficult task but it is certainly

not insurmountable.

I believe that we can make this evolving process self-sustainable. It will require political will, commitment and lending a hand of support to the interacting organizations within the institutional co-management framework. Undertaking such a course of action in an inter-active manner through horizontal linkages will help us to succeed. We have to understand that a better water management approach (involving shared responsibilities, trust and inclusiveness) juxtaposed with a rehabilitated ecosystem translates to improved livelihoods within the local economy.

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# Ailing countryside: Arrest rural-urban exodus

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THERE are enquiries often mixed with innuendo as to when the present government would make rice available at 10 taka per kg and distribute fertilizer free of cost as, they allege, the AL leaders made pledges in their campaign speeches. However, none in the country should harbour any illusion that at any time in future rice would be selling at 10 taka per kg and about 35 lakh ton fertilizer needed for agricultural production could be given without charging any price.

The whole agricultural mechanism geared for boosting production has changed drastically because of the escalation in cost factors in irrigation power, improved seed, fertilizer and pesticide. A people's government could only induce the farmers remain busy in boosting production of food crops that in consequence will keep the prices down within the purchasing power of the consumers, by allowing subsidy to agricultural inputs. However it must be admitted that the reduction in diesel and kerosene price by 2 taka per litre would not bring any tangible relief to the farmers or would help bring down the price of

agricultural commodities in any meaningful way.

Leaving aside the agricultural sector, the main challenges facing the present government are : containing terrorism, augmenting power generation, bringing down prices of essentials and implementing an education policy meeting the needs of the new millennium. Unfortunately before the new government could settle down to its tasks and start resolving the issues hurting the economy, the country witnessed an upsurge of violence during and after the upazila elections, student unrest on the campuses and other unrests.

Despite all the odds the people are optimistic about democratic governance. True, this government has inherited an economy that is badly weakened in consequence of greed, irresponsibility and self enrichment of the stalwarts of the immediate past alliance government. However, the new Prime Minister in her election manifesto made pledges to change the face of the country through good governance. She made pledges to build a happy and prosperous Bangladesh through building a participatory and tolerant democratic culture that will ensure social

Unless we have been able to foster economic growth and forge income generation activities in the rural base, rural-urban exodus will continue. In absence of distribution and marketing mechanism and an efficient and quick mode of transportation, there occurs glut of agricultural commodities like tomato, mango, pineapple, guava, banana, lemon, etc. in rural markets, in the peak season of harvesting. Surely, things would not have come to such a sorry pass had we have a lot of agro-based industries in the countryside.



justice, empowerment of women and equality of opportunity, establishment of the rule of law and protection of human rights.

Economic situation in the country is already precarious and will continue to worsen unless some very bold and

swift decisions like formulating the coal policy, gas exploration policy and the dilemma over transit issue, are taken. The country's power generation activities hinges mostly on the coal and gas exploration activities. This government has come with a mandate for full

five years and as the morning shows the day, it is time for the Prime Minister to show the people what she can do for them.

Most of the countryside where some 70 per cent of the population lives, remains as poor as ever. The lower middle

class, rickshaw-pullers, day labourers, fishermen, weavers, etc. all belonging to this soil, just could not share the country's economic growth. Sadly enough as political bickering lingers even after a credible election, reform measures stall, economic woes mount, more and more people, with education or no education get wary and are virtually trying to flee the countryside.

Rural horizon is highly charged with rising and unfulfilled expectations of the vast numbers of unemployed youths. No wonder, it is because of the inequitable distribution of the economic gains and total lack of expansion of basic industries which could offer employment facilities to a large chunk, unemployed youths of that people are crying for bridging the gap in regional disparity. The rural areas have vast possibilities. The populace is implicitly

committed and imbued with a sense integrity and purpose. But these potentialities till now remain to be exploited.

In the face of political conflict and clashes, vandalism, extortion spree, terrorism, chaotic transport system, power crisis and other disincentives, many potential foreign investors are withdrawing from Bangladesh and looking for elsewhere. Bangladeshis too are pulling out their money. Why risk expropriation in a country virtually governed by lawlessness, terrorism, and extortion?

During the next five-year term of this government, political leaders belonging to the ruling party and industrial entrepreneurs must consider self-sacrifice rather than self-enrichment as the most essential agenda. In rejecting the other political parties in the just concluded election, the country's largely illiterate and overwhelmingly poor electorate confirmed a vigorous tradition of exercising their right to make free political choices.

The ruling party has to stem the public confidence in the government. What is needed is probity on the part of the leaders accompanied by tough and consistent enforcement of laws without fear or favour. Containment of corruption in public life would reassure

investors from within and without. System of kickbacks that flourished enormously in the previous regime must end. Senseless bureaucratic regulation and political interference have almost stifled the growth of industries in the country. If we have to stop migration of people from the countryside, then a lot of agro-based industries, maybe small scale, have to be set up to keep people provided there. It is through such ventures that the Prime Minister's election manifesto of providing job to at least one person from each family in the country can be translated into action.

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# It's really a global crisis

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WE should all want President Obama to succeed in reviving the economy, but that shouldn't obscure the long odds he faces. We need to recognize that we're not grappling with a single economic crisis. We face three separate crises, which are interwoven but which are also distinct and different. The solution to any one of them won't automatically resuscitate the larger economy if the others remain untreated and unchanged.

Here are the three. FIRST: the collapse of consumer spending. American consumers represent 70 percent of the economy. Traumatized by plunging home values and stock prices which have shaved at least \$7 trillion from personal wealth they've curbed spending and increased saving. That's led directly to layoffs and higher unemployment. In December, auto and light-truck sales were down 36 percent from a year earlier.

SECOND: the financial crisis. Lending has atrophied, depriving the economy of the

credit to finance new factories, homes and costly consumer purchases (cars, appliances). The deepest cuts involve "securitization" the sale of bonds. Investors have gone on strike. In 2008, the issuance of investment-grade corporate bonds dropped 35 percent, reports Thomson Financial. Bonds backing credit-card loans fell 41 percent, and those backing car loans, 51 percent. THIRD: the trade crisis. There's a mismatch between national spending and saving patterns. High-saving Asian countries relied on export-led growth that, in turn, required American consumers to spend ever-larger shares of their income. Huge trade imbalances resulted: U.S. deficits, Asian surpluses. But as Americans shift from spending to saving, this pattern is no longer sustainable. Asia is tumbling into recession. China may grow 6 percent or less in 2009, half its 2007 rate.

Overcoming any of these crises alone would be daunting. Together, they're the economic equivalent of a combined triathlon and Tour de France.

If China and other Asian nations try to export their way out of trouble, they're likely to be disappointed. Any import surge into the United States would weaken an incipient American recovery and possibly trigger a protectionist reaction. Down that path lies tit-for-tat economic nationalism that might harm everyone. Growing trade and investment barriers would shrink markets.

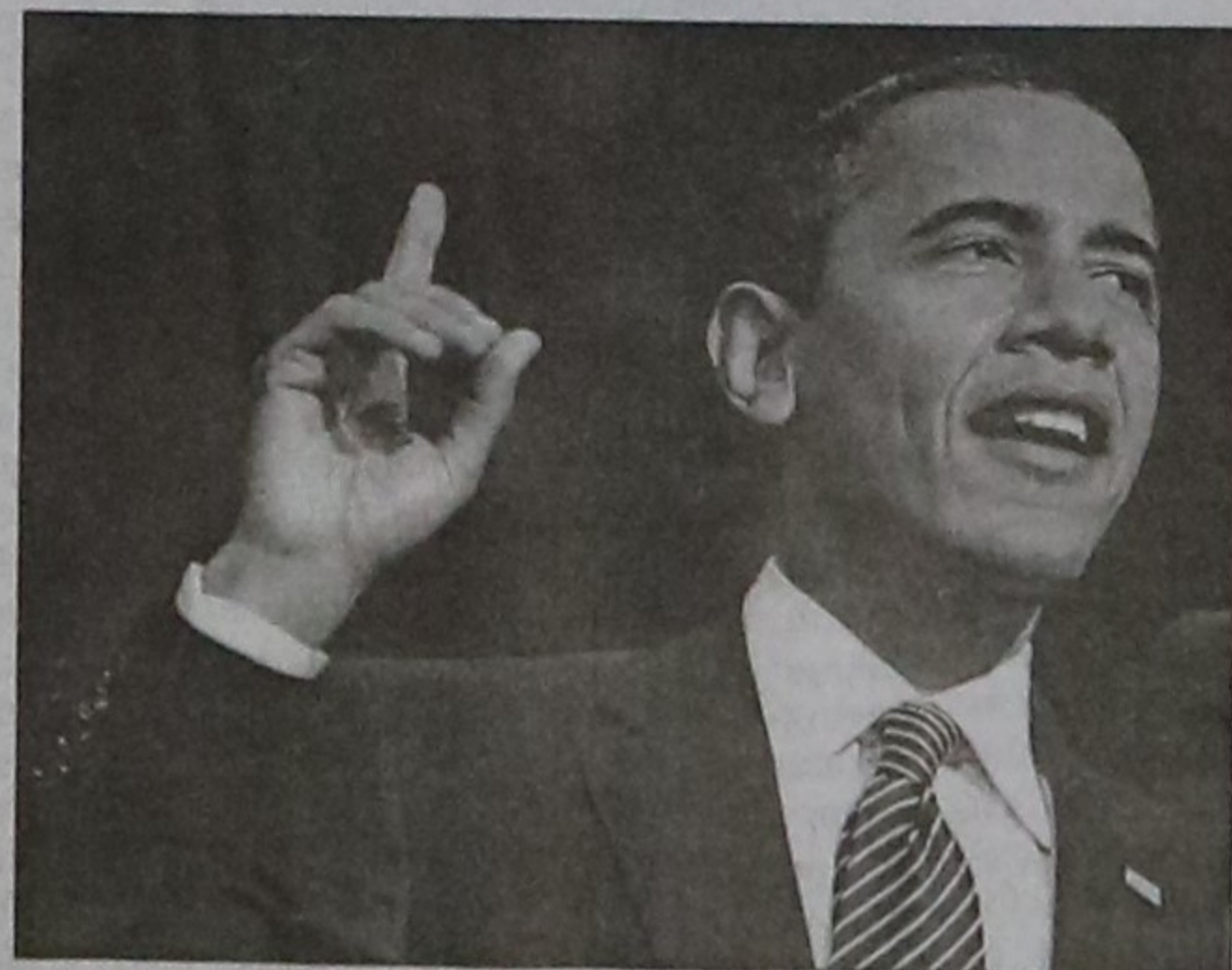
Consider consumer spending. The proposed remedy is the "economic stimulus" plan. On paper, this seems sensible. If government doesn't offset declines in consumer spending, housing and business investment, might not the economy spiral downward for several years? Last week, House committees considered an \$825 billion package, split between \$550 billion in additional spending and \$275 billion in tax cuts.

The trouble is that, in practice, the program could disappoint. Parts of the House package look like a giant political slush fund, with money sprinkled to dozens of programs. There's \$50 million for the National Endowment for the Arts, \$200 million for the Teacher Incentive Fund and \$15.6 billion for increased Pell Grants to college students. Some of these propos-

als, whatever their other merits, won't produce many new jobs.

Another problem: construction spending for schools, clinics, roads may start so slowly that there's little immediate boost for the \$14 trillion economy. The Congressional Budget Office examined 356 billion in spending proposals and concluded that only 7 percent would be spent in 2009 and 31 percent in 2010.

But suppose the stimulus is a smashing success. It cushions the recession. Unemployment (now 7.2 percent) stops rising at, say, 8 percent instead of 10 percent. Still, a temporary stimulus can't fuel a permanent recovery. That requires, among other things, a strong financial system to supply the credit needs of an expanding economy. How we get that



isn't clear.

The pillars of a successful financial system have crumbled: the ability to assess risk, adequate capital to absorb losses and trust among the players banks, investors, traders. A common denominator in these ills has been the

consistent underestimation of losses. Economists at Goldman Sachs now believe that worldwide losses on mortgages, bonds and consumer and business loans total \$2.1 trillion, with \$962 billion belonging to U.S. banks. In March, the

Goldman estimate was about half that. Economist Nouriel Roubini's estimate of losses is higher than Goldman's.

All the new credit programs the Treasury's Troubled Asset Relief Program and various Federal Reserve lending facilities aim at counteracting these problems by providing government money and government guarantees. Probably Obama will expand these efforts, despite some obvious problems: if government oversight becomes too intrusive or punitive, it might deter much-needed infusions of private capital into banks. Again, let's assume Obama's policies surmount the obstacles. Credit flows and confidence rises.

Even then, we have no assurance of a vigorous recovery, because at bottom the economic crisis is global in scope. The old trading patterns simply won't work anymore. If China and other Asian nations try to export their way out of trouble, they're likely to be disappointed. Any import surge into the United States would weaken an incipient American recovery and possibly trigger a protectionist

reaction. Down that path lies tit-for-tat economic nationalism that might harm everyone. Growing trade and investment barriers would shrink markets.

Indeed, if the rest of the world doesn't buy more from America, any U.S. recovery may be feeble. What's needed are policies that correct the underlying imbalances in spending and saving. As Americans save more of their incomes, Asians should save less and spend more, so that they rely more on satisfying their own wants to generate jobs and economic growth as opposed to exports. The great trade discrepancies would shrink. Americans would export more, import less; Asians would do the opposite.

But this sort of transformation requires basic political changes in Asia to complement changes in U.S. policies. Whether China and other Asian societies can make those changes is unclear. The implications are sobering. The success of Obama's policies lies, to a considerable extent, outside Obama's hands.

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