Why cities are the best weapon against climate change

ADNAN MORSHED

WHEN we think of the effects of climate change we usually conjure up haunting images of coastal areas, melting icebergs, deserts littered with animal carcasses, and drought-hit territories with burnt trees.

But we rarely think of the city as an affected area due to climate change or, more importantly, as a cause of it. There is an ongoing disconnect between the discussions on global climate-related vulnerabilities and the processes of urbanisation. This is perplexing because urbanisation has become one of the most powerful and visible anthropogenic effects on Earth. The world's urban population will rise from less than 30% in 1950 to 75% by 2050. Cities are the engines of economic growth. South Korea's 50% GDP is attributed to Seoul; in Bangladesh, 36% to Dhaka. However, the flipside of the city's heroic economic narrative is that cities are also the most corrosive pollutants of the planet's environment. They produce more than 75% of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions. With their industrial activities, population density, transportation, and energy usage, they are key contributors to global warming.

Mitigating climate change problems, thus, requires a sustained engagement with the ways cities are designed, governed, maintained, and developed.

Bangladesh has missed this policy focus so far. Here, the climate change conversation has been singularly dominated by the specter of a "southern threat." That is, with ongoing global warming and the resultant sea-level rise, a significant landmass of Bangladesh's coastal south would disappear under water. And, a vast coastal population would lose their livelihood and become climate refugees, destabilising local and regional security. Al Gore's Oscar-winning documentary, An Inconvenient Truth (2006), helped popularise this particular view of Bangladesh among the global community concerned with climate change and its disastrous effects on such low-lying countries as Bangladesh and Maldives.

The susceptibility of Bangladesh's southern seaboard to global climatic catastrophes cannot be underestimated. But a linear emphasis on the southern threat, unfortunately, blurs the urgency of the country's more immediate environmental threats due to rapid, ecology-defying urbanisation. An immediate environmental menace with long-term climatic implications lurks at the geographic centre of the country because of the monstrous urban growth of Dhaka and its deleterious effects on the fragile land-water ecosystem that has historically sustained the capital and its surrounding regions. Dhaka's frenzied growth in all directions, devouring rivers, water bodies, and agricultural lands, is as serious an environmental threat as the sea-level rise due to global warming.

The capital's urban growth not only exemplifies the dire environmental consequences of uncontrolled and profit-driven urbanisation in Bangladesh, but also alarms us, more generally, about the collective need to view cities as the frontier of climate change. With sustainable environmental policies cities present the single most potent weapon to combat climate-related environmental problems.

Three urban policies, by no means exclusive, should be considered for cities to be an efficient defense against climate change.

First, a city's growth must take into consideration the ecology of the place. Altering the fundamental geography of a place in the name of development would mean tampering with nature's balance which is essential for a place's continued ecological harmony. Consider Chittagong. Rampant hill-cutting in the port city changes its land form (which is nature's trial-and-error method of perfecting a geographic condition through millions of years), exposing it to natural calamities caused by climatic abnormalities. River-filling in Dhaka would mean fewer drainage arteries for the snow-melted water that descends from the Himalayan plateau and passes through the flat Bengal delta.

Second, cities must be compact, so that they can foster walkable communities and a culture of smaller carbon footprints. Compact cities are served well by a mass transit system, reducing the need for personal cars and carbon emissions from them. A compact metropolis with an urban growth boundary stops sprawl, generates fewer heat-producing surfaces, and preserves carbon-reducing agricultural fields. Lest we forget, buildings and transportation together account for 37% of global carbon emissions. A perpetually expanding city, with its built-up area and dependence on personal transportation, is basically a heat island and a carbon factory. Consider the devastating possibility of a Dhaka extended up to or beyond Aricha in the north and Mawa Ghat in the south, and all the rivers, canals, wetlands, and arable lands in between are filled up to create buildable lands (this is already happening). Urban compactness has become one of the essential mantras of sustainable urbanism and an efficient strategy against global warming.

Third, implementation of environmental laws should be a top-down urbanisation policy to ensure the preservation of a city's "lifeline" like rivers, hills, wetlands, etc. The protection of natural resources provides cities and their regions with the best ability to be resilient in the face of natural disasters. Cities provide easy access to transportation hubs. Thus, factories tend to flock to cities, so that they can easily and quickly export their products. But, as much as they are stimulants of national economy factories are also environmental pollutants, unless strict environmental laws are enforced. Consider the air-polluting brickfields of Ashulia on the outskirts of Dhaka. Their environmental hazards may seem local and temporary, but they severely harm the region's long-term climate resiliency.

The best way to tackle climate-induced vulnerabilities is to protect and preserve nature's way of balancing itself. When excessively profit-driven human actions take precedence over nature's balance, when human activities radically alter a place's elementary geography, their environmental consequences are bound to be calamitous. Since the future of the world is urban, the best place to ensure the planet's ecological wellbeing is the city. This basic understanding should frame Bangladesh's urbanisation policies.

The writer is an associate professor of architecture and planning in Washington, DC, and author of *Oculus: A Decade of Insights into Bangladeshi Affairs*.

Let's understand social business before trying to trash it

A response to "The 'Social Entrepreneurship' Conundrum"

UJAL IBRAHIM

ON June 19, 2014, The Daily Star published an op-ed titled "The 'Social Entrepreneurship' Conundrum" written by Ahmad Ibrahim on the subject of social business. I have been connected with the concept of social business -- mostly the academic side of it -- since its inception. I am responding below to some of the writer's arguments.

1. Op-ed's argument: The entrepreneur may have no share of the social business. Even after the investor has received his share of the invested amount as dividend, the investor still owns the business.

Nobin Udykta (NU) is a term used for the son or the daughter of a Grameen Bank borrower, who aspires to create a business and become an entrepreneur. The NU begins the business as a managing partner or a paid manager of the business owned by the investor. The investor recoups the invested money in a certain time period as per agreement with the entrepreneur. Then comes the major responsibility/objective of the investor, which is to transform a job-seeker into a job-giver. The investor's entire purpose of investing in the NU is to establish the young person as an entrepreneur. The investor does this by selling his shares to the entrepreneur following social business guidelines (the guideline is discussed in answering the following arguments).

2. Op-ed's argument: Buying the investor's share to become the owner of the business is a heavy burden for the entrepreneur after having already paid the original invested amount.

In the NU programme, an easy rule has been made to transfer ownership to the entrepreneur. The investor will take an amount equivalent to the original investment amount plus a fixed sum of 20 % over it. For example, if the entrepreneur is paying back the investment amount of Tk. 100, he will have to pay back a total fixed amount of Tk. 120 irrespective of the time it takes to pay back the money. This additional amount is called a "share transfer fee," according to the social business guideline. The total repayment burden would have been twice or even thrice if the entrepreneur had to borrow the money from a bank.

Here are the justifications of charging that share transfer fee. First of all, to purchase the share of the investor in the NU programme, the entrepreneur is asked to pay the amount equivalent to face value, which is much smaller than the market value in a successful business. Secondly, the investor in this case is an active investor, not a passive one. He provides a lot of services -- he prepares the entrepreneur to become an efficient entrepreneur, trains him, provides guidance and support services, monitors his business performance, and bears the business risk. That fixed share transfer fee for covering all these services over a period of several years is just a modest fee indeed.

3. Op-ed's argument: The NU programme only accepts those whose families already have years of borrowing history with Grameen Bank. There will already be a significant amount of debt for the household. Is it wise to push them onto more debt?

Initially, the NU programme was designed to inspire the sons or daughters of Grameen Bank borrowers to create businesses, with Grameen Bank loans, instead of hunting for jobs. The programme did not pick up speed because parents were reluctant to let their sons or daughters take more loans while they still had the unpaid education loans. Bank staff were also slow in giving them fresh loans because they still had outstanding loans to clear.

The idea of involving the NU programme to "social business" was to shift from loans to equity so that the entrepreneurs do not have to worry about outstanding loans from Grameen Bank. Now, Grameen Bank does not operate nor invest in the NU programme. The investors here are the interested individuals and organisations. The entrepreneur is linked up with social business investors who would invest in their businesses. He pays the investment back over a mutually agreed upon time schedule. This programme has nothing to do with Grameen Bank's loans, so there is no question of being pushed into more debt.

4. Op-ed's argument: If the investor sells his shares at the market value, then he cannot hold on to the extra earning over the face value that he received. This amount has to be reinvested into another social business or the same social business. This is perhaps the biggest loophole in social business programs that will cause lending firms such as Grameen Bank to rake in millions in profit.

If an investor sells his share in a social business at market value, he cannot keep the extra value earned for himself. He must invest that "extra" into a social business fund or into a social business. Surprisingly enough, the writer brings Grameen Bank out of nowhere. Firstly, Grameen Bank has not been an investor in social business; in fact, Grameen Bank has nothing to do with the entire social business process. Secondly, the investor's extra money in this case is invested in a "social business," not in lending firms! The investor is not keeping the extra or enjoying it anyway!

5. Op-ed's argument: After the investor recoups the original investment, he sells his share to the entrepreneur. With the extra money he receives, he can dive into another social business -- and the cycle can go on and on until Tk. 1 of investment turns into Tk. 1 lakh.

Seems like the writer is considering a social business a money machine for the investor! Unfortunately, he is missing all the points of social business. Again, if the investor sells his share at the market value, he has to reinvest the "additional money" he receives beyond the face value into another social business, or in the same social business. The investor is not making any money.

6. Op-ed's argument: In the NU programme, the investor receives a 20% share transfer fee over the face value of the share. Even if this is free from increasing interest rates on loans, it provides a loophole for a firm to make exponential profit from a small original sum.

The process of selling the investor's share, and the justification of charging the 20% share transfer fee have already been discussed above (please see the response to the op-ed's argument number 2). The increasing interest rates of loan are not applicable here, since the investor will take an amount equivalent to the original investment amount plus additional fixed sum of 20% over it when he sells his share. Where is the "loophole?" Where is the "exponential profit?"

It is very unfortunate that the writer jumped to trash social business without understanding the very fundamentals of it, and created a lot of confusion by bringing references to Grameen Bank, indebtedness, exponential profit, etc., where there is no relevance for these elements in social business.

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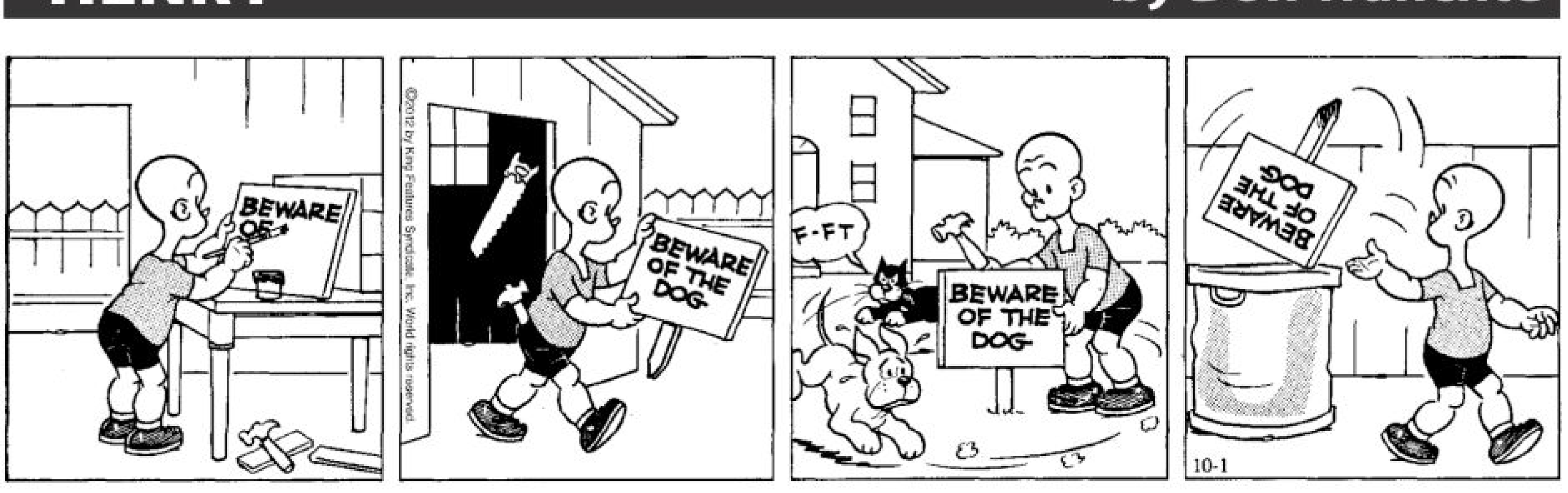
BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Tranchte



QUOTABLE Quote

In football everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team.

Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre

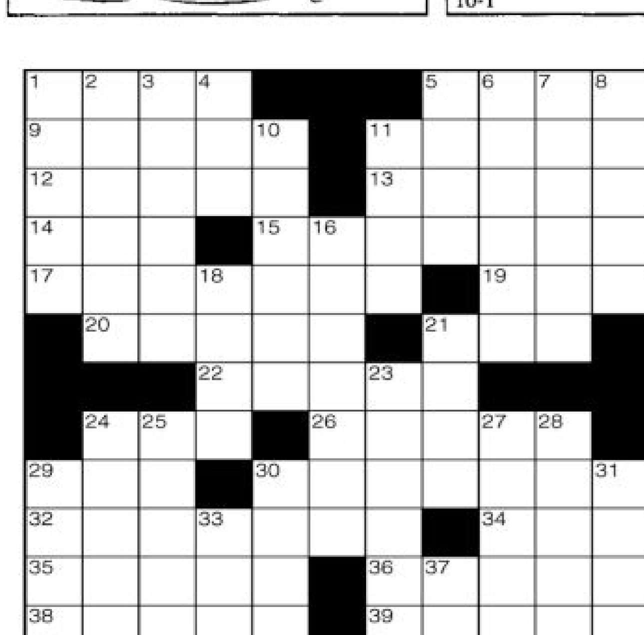
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Organ part
5 2000 super bowl champs
9 Chocolate substitute
11 Vehicle sight
12 Let up
13 Sprightly
14 Horror star Chaney
15 Lost it
17 "Rats!"
19 TV spots
20 Paris sight
21 Crafty
22 Stable sound
24 Long of "Soul Food"
26 Chess castles
29 Swindle
30 Flipped
32 Depleted
34 Receipt line
35 Get on
36 Use a soapbox
38 Highway sections
39 Frisco player
40 Whirl of water
41 Yester-year

DOWN

1 Burn with water
2 No-nos
3 Juicer fruit
4 Poker prize
5 Latest fad
6 "20 Questions" category
7 Ailment
8 Winter gliders
10 "Shoo!"
11 Walking aid
16 Golfer's cleek
18 Gershon of "Bound"
21 Oxford, for one
23 Continued
24 Commission-free
25 Not on the coast
27 Samurai sword
28 Outpourings
29 Elevator lifter
30 Olympus group
31 Wield, as power
33 Neutral color
37 Tear



Yesterday's answer

P	A	R	K	A	S	■	D	I	E	D
A	D	M	I	R	E	■	E	D	G	E
R	O	S	E	I	N	B	L	O	O	M
■	■	■	F	E	D	U	P	■	■	■
■	A	R	E	S	■	S	H	E	D	■
T	B	A	R	■	S	H	I	V	E	R
U	R	N	■	H	A	Y	■	I	C	E
B	A	G	B	O	Y	■	S	T	O	P
■	M	E	A	L	■	S	P	A	R	■
■	■	■	S	L	O	P	E	■	■	■
D	A	I	S	Y	M	I	L	L	E	R
A	X	L	E	■	I	N	L	O	V	E
M	E	L	T	■	T	E	S	T	E	D

CRYPTOQUOTE 5-10

IFLXL MXL QOKA IHQ IFNOJR M WFNKS HNKK RFMXL HNKKNOJKA; WQEETONWMDKL SNRLMRLR MOS NIR EQUIFLX'R MJL.
- DLOZMENO RYQWV

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: MAN, THE LIVING CREATURE, THE CREATING INDIVIDUAL, IS ALWAYS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY ESTABLISHED STYLE OR SYSTEM. - BRUCE LEE

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.