

Time to adapt to climate change in South Asia

BINDU LOHANI

CLIMATE change will sow confusion and concern as it unfolds across South Asia in coming decades. Home to a quarter of the world's population, this vast region will be hit harder than just about anywhere else. Sudden flooding, storms, droughts and other hazards will upend lives, livelihoods, and economies.

As this grim future takes shape, the price of global inaction is rising each year. Up to 9% will have been stripped annually from South Asia's economy on average by 2100 if no further action is taken globally on climate change, says a new report by the Asian Development Bank, Assessing the Costs of Climate Change and Adaptation in South Asia. There's an outside chance of those losses blowing out to 24% given the uncertainty surrounding climate change's future impacts.

What can be done? The region's countries have taken steps to cushion the impact of a warming world, but bolder action is needed. Given the slow pace of global mitigation efforts, the worst-case scenario of huge economic losses might end up being South Asia's future by default.

While only global action will halt climate change, countries should not wait on it before taking adaptive measures. They can be as straightforward as placing sand-filled geotextile bags along riverbanks to stall erosion as happened recently in low-lying Bangladesh, where an area up to a third the size of metropolitan Chittagong is swallowed annually. Or they can be more wide-ranging, like a recent initiative of the United Kingdom government, The Rockefeller Foundation and ADB to boost climate resilience at 25 cities in Asia by helping to integrate climate risks into city plans and develop resilient infrastructure.

Those efforts must now be mainstreamed into national devel-

opment plans, with governments, the private sector and civil society working together. Moreover, as climate change ignores national borders, South Asia's countries must respond cooperatively through a regional framework to promote technology transfer, dialogue, and sharing of best practices.

The sooner this happens, the better. Though some areas may benefit temporarily from a see-sawing climate, overall it will be very bad news for South Asia's 1.5 billion people if nothing is done globally.

Maldives and Nepal would lose 12.6% and 9.9% of their economies respectively each year by 2100. Losses in Bangladesh would tally 9.4%, India 8.7%, Bhutan 6.6% and Sri Lanka 6.5%.

But the damage would be significantly less if global action is taken on climate change, with just 2.5% culled from the region's potential gross domestic product by the end of the century.

Obviously this best-case scenario is preferable, particularly in South Asia which due to its geography, huge population and widespread poverty faces acute climate risks. Extreme weather events will become a more destructive fact of life. Droughts will be longer and more intense, while storm surges from rising sea-levels and floods from heavier rain will be constant threats. Flooding will also occur as lakes formed by melting glaciers burst their banks, and frequent landslides will dump debris into rivers, endangering lives and infrastructure.

This will make it tougher for South Asia's economies to achieve rapid growth, but the human toll is even more alarming. Those likely to suffer most are the 600 million South Asians living in absolute poverty - more than half the world's total poor. Escaping from poverty will become an even more daunting challenge, as many poor people depend for their livelihoods on

climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture, forestry, and traditional fishing.

Bangladesh is one of 10 countries most at risk from climate change. Extreme weather events, heat stress, and shorter growing seasons will slash crop yields. Coastal residents will confront flooding and storm surges as sea levels rise. Dependence on agriculture and a low rate of rural electrification will magnify the challenges.

Across the subcontinent, impacts will include higher incidence of diseases like dengue, patchier energy supply and higher electricity bills, erosion and reduced household water stocks. Hard-hit communities may have to relocate to survive.

These are just some of the climate shocks that will jolt South Asia in coming years. Just how hard they hit will depend, to a degree, on global action - or lack thereof - on climate change. But that only makes the case even more compelling for better climate change adaptation. Just a few of the many adaptive options available include using drought, flood and salt-resistant crop varieties, reforming water policy, and building better drainage systems.

And the time for action is now. Because the longer South Asia waits to step up its adaptive response, the more it will cost.

If temperatures and sea-levels rise appreciably amid global inaction, the annual average cost of climate change adaptation could hit \$73 billion between now and 2100, but only \$41 billion under a more optimistic scenario. Upgrading adaptation from today will make the cost more manageable, no matter what happens globally.

South Asia has made huge strides in boosting prosperity and reducing poverty. It would be a tragedy if climate change were allowed to roll back those gains.

The writer is ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development, Asian Development Bank.

Appointment of new information commissioners

SUCHISMITA GOSWAMI

Two out of three posts at the Bangladesh Information Commission are lying vacant for the past month. The government knew they were falling vacant when information commissioners Sadeka Halim and MA Taher finished their tenure. But there has been little forward planning and no seamless transition. Ironically there little or no information forthcoming about how the government is going about selecting the next guardians of transparency. The Right to Information Forum

This year's selection of Commissions seems doomed to follow the earlier precedent of secrecy. This always raises eyebrows and courts criticism about favorites being appointed through patronage. This suspicion even if untrue weakens public trust in the Commission.

A collective of civil society organisations has been raising pertinent questions about the whole selection process and has urged government to "appoint capable, credible and neutral persons to the vacant posts of information commissioners as soon as possible to avoid any disruption in the commission's activities".

This year's selection of Commissions seems doomed to follow the earlier precedent of secrecy. This always raises eyebrows and courts criticism about favorites being appointed through patronage. This suspicion even if untrue weakens

public trust in the Commission. Just 5 years old the relatively new institution requires all the credibility it can get in order to put down strong foundations of public trust that will enable this vital mechanism to bring about transparency in government. Sadly Bangladesh's biggest neighbor provides it a bad example to follow. India does not have an open process. As a result India's many information commissions have routinely become comfortable perches for retired civil servants - often with long experience keeping government information close rather than tending toward championing transparency. The Bangladesh law requires information commissioners to be chosen from among "law, justice, journalism, education, science, technology, information, social service, management or public administration." But the public administration category is broad enough to allow packing the Commission with a predominance of old civil servants. Closed door processes make bad choices that much easier.

But the neighborhood offers plenty of good practice as well. Indonesia appoints its information commissioners in the most transparent and participatory way. A list of potential members for the Information Committee is published and made available to the public. The public can then express their opinions about the potential members with reasons. Those reasons are taken into consideration and finally the Parliament of the Republic of Indonesia selects the members of the Central Information Committee who are then officially appointed by the President of Indonesia.

In the Maldives the post for information commissioner is advertised and qualified people can apply or their names can be suggested by others. The President picks out three names of qualified candidates and sends it out to the Majlis (Maldivian Parliament). The President also forwards the comprehensive list of all the respondents who answered the public announcement to the Majlis. The

President would then appoint that person as Information Commissioner whose name is passed by majority in the Majlis. So there are checks and balances and transparency of process. Bangladesh on the other hand violates all forms of public consultation or transparency in the selection process of Information Commission. It depends on a very loosely formed selection committee comprising of five members for recommending two names against each vacant names. In order to gain respect and credibility for the institution among the citizens of Bangladesh it is extremely important for the Information Commission to mandatorily disclose the selection process.

The government in order to set example for smooth functioning of the Information Commission should look into the three bottlenecks raised in this article. Firstly to immediately start the process of appointing Information Commissioners, secondly to make the process more participatory and transparent for the public and lastly efforts should be made bring people with expertise from various fields of knowledge. Every moment of governance signals the future. It can be pregnant with possibility or poisoned with the seeds of its own destruction. Transparency in governance is vital to Bangladesh's democracy, to its economic advancement to building its stature in the world. Strong institutions that command public respect increase the possibility of success. Delay in choosing commissioners signals the government's lack of priority for the commissions work. The closed process signals it does not trust the participation of its people and prefers the safety of limiting knowledge in order to control who finally adjudicates on questions where government is inevitably the defending party. A bold shift in the method of choosing commissioners will bring the government popular admiration and a strong commission.

The writer is Project Officer, Access to Information Programme, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

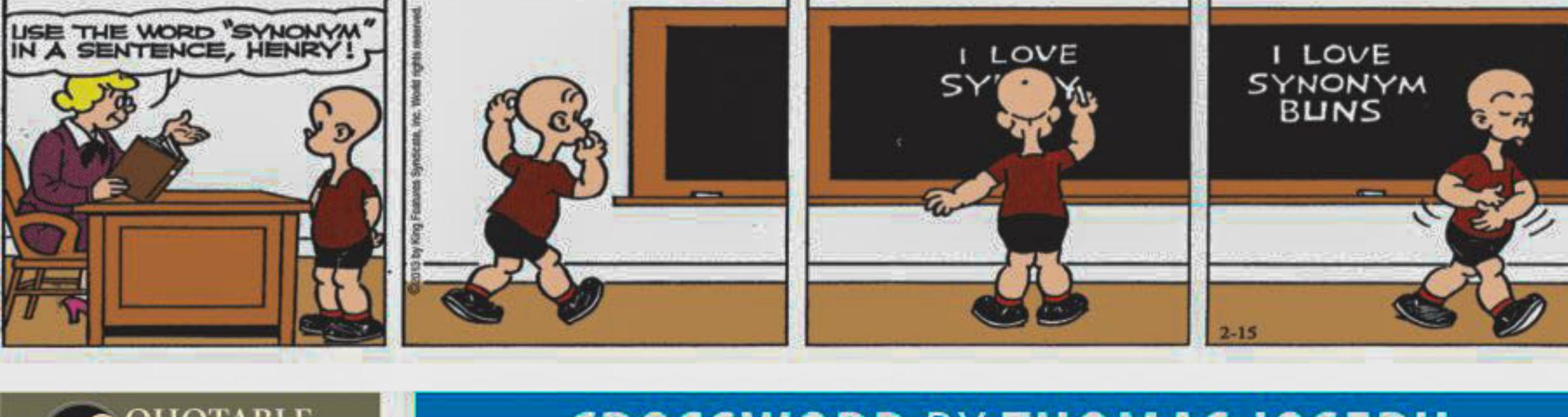
BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte

QUOTEABLE
Quote

Whether you come from heaven or hell, what does it matter, O Beauty!

Charles Baudelaire

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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