

Suicide and its prevention



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

IN what has been hailed as "landmark" study, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has brought out a report on the global scenario on suicides. It gives us a glimpse into why people decide to end their lives, reasons for and what national governments are doing about it. Although details about this form of self-destruction are sketchy in

to neglect them, we are essentially turning our backs to a great many people who could be saved. The same may be said about those who are addicts and suffer from substance abuse. The need to hide away those who do not conform to society's perceptions about what is "normal" or "acceptable" may well be precipitating these groups of people to feel abandoned and turn them vulnerable to the point that death seems a welcome release. As there is stigma attached to "suicide", it remains under-reported and so the actual numbers of deaths may actually be much higher. And why shouldn't the figure be higher in any case? Have we done anything to restrict the means to suicide? Pesticides and poisons are easily available over the counter and sold to anyone who can afford them. Our

Unfortunately, only 28 countries out of 194 nations that are member of WHO have a national suicide prevention plan. And unless the issue is brought to the fore, the problem will remain largely unaddressed.

lower to middle income countries, it is estimated that some 804,000 people killed themselves in 2012 worldwide, with men outnumbering women at a ratio of 2:1. What we didn't know that it is the 15th-most common cause of death "and it is the second-highest for young people age 15-29." Indeed 3/4th of these deaths come from low or middle-income countries.

What has come to light is that collective action is needed to prevent what is being termed as a "preventable death". And since no age group is above committing such an act, countries around the world need to do more in terms of public policy to prevent suicides. Unfortunately, only 28 countries out of 194 nations that are member of WHO have a national suicide prevention plan. And unless the issue is brought to the fore, the problem will remain largely unaddressed. It is interesting to find that in many nations, suicide is deemed illegal under law. Yet data show that the number of deaths in these countries is no less. There is no "one size fits all" solution to this conundrum. As put by Professor Rory O'Connor of the University of Glasgow's Suicidal Behaviour Research Laboratory, "there is so much more that can be done at the local, community and national levels to tackle the problems of suicide and minimise the needless loss of life".

In a country like Bangladesh there were an estimated 10,000 suicides in 2012. These are the "reported" deaths. When one takes into account that society largely ignores a large number of people in the population due mental disorders and families generally tend

bridges remain unprotected and it is easy to jump off any one of them.

As stated before, to combat a phenomenon such as suicide, the issue must be prioritised as a public health issue that will involve both state and non-state actors. It would require resource allocation in the annual budget that would pay for health services and educational materials, physical impediments that would actively prevent access to risky areas such as bridges, social networks like self-help groups where people with suicidal inclinations could and would reach out for help; raising awareness amongst the general populace with the aid of national media, which has its role cut out in being responsible when it comes to reporting on suicide. There is no room for sensationalism and "re-

sponsibility" comes with not prioritising such news items, rather, educating the masses by providing information on where and how to get help. Media can, in effect, break the negative attitudes surrounding mental disorders by running awareness campaigns. Though there is no hard evidence with regards to such campaigns having impacting positively on reduction on of suicides, they have however served well to raise community awareness. The idea is to encourage public debate on the issue through print and electronic media, the internet, social media, posters, etc.

To put things in perspective, one can cite the example of Japan which is a country that experienced suicides exceeding 32,000, which had previously recorded a national average of about 25,000 over the previous decade. Japan at the time was suffering from socioeconomic problems and suicide rates were off the charts for all age groups. Until that time the suicide phenomenon was considered to be a personal problem. The change came with parents speaking out in media about the loss of their children to media. The ministry of health responded by in 2002 by holding an "expert roundtable on suicide prevention measures" that led to a suicide prevention policy to effectively address mental health issues coupled with "a multifaceted examination of psychological, social, cultural and economic factors." It paved the way for treating suicide as a "social" problem rather than a "personal" one. It helped build public opinion leading to government funding. The Regional fund was geared specifically towards suicide prevention activities that brought under one umbrella various activities like intensive public awareness campaigns.

At the end of the day, like Japan or any of the other 27 countries that have developed policies and concrete actions on the ground through secure government funding, Bangladesh will have to first recognise suicide as a public health issue and then go about taking the aid of national and international agencies, involve state and non-state actors in combating a condition that is more than just medical in nature.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Sustainable drinking water: Aila's enduring effects

A. S. MONIRUZZAMAN KHAN and MINHAZ FARID AHMED

AILA made a devastating strike at the coastline of Bangladesh more than five years ago. The affected regions still remain scarred from its ravages. An unforgettable nightmare for the local people, Aila took their lives, property, and livelihood, and damaged the ecosystem, while affecting land fertility and drinking water sources. The Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER), BRAC University, conducted a study in the coastal areas of Bangladesh to investigate the current scenario of safe drinking water there. The study collected data from six villages of Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Barguna, Patuakhali and Pirojpur district. A total of 758 households were surveyed.

While the local people have painstakingly rebuilt their lives, their access to drinking water sources has been severely damaged. Salt water entered their ponds and made the water unfit for drinking. Thus there are limited sources of reliable water supply in the study area. Pond water is very popular in the local community; however its quality remains unmonitored and questionable. Unfortunately, very few initiatives have been taken by the government or non-government organizations to investigate the quality of pond and tube well water in the study area.

Around 96% of total people surveyed do not have any tube wells of their own; most of them collected drinking water from their ponds. In fact many used to drink water from the canals in Bagerhat, Patuakhali and Pirojpur. However, in the Ashan Nagar and Char Nimdi village, local people depend on other sources like tube well, rain water harvesting, pond sand filter (PSF), etc. Unfortunately these sources are widely dispersed. Rain water harvesting for drinking purposes is now becoming more common. Those who have a sufficient numbers of water containers can harvest rain water during the wet season. But the poor people cannot use this method of water storage because of the financial implications. A possible strategy here is to build community based rain water harvesting systems to ensure good quality drinking water for the poor people.

People also have to travel long distances in order to collect water. Out of the total population studied (i.e. around 8,576 people), 28% collect water from a distance of 201 to 500 meters. More than 40% travel greater distances for the same purpose.

During a natural disaster like flood, storm surge or cyclone, the villagers become highly vulnerable in terms of drinking water. The greatest problem at this time is the collection of water from far way as the sources of drinking water are damaged and the existing road network is also washed away. Wastage of time is thus a major burden. All road networks, especially in Satkhira district, went under water immediately after Aila. Besides, in Bagerhat, Barguna and Patuakhali districts some people collected water by using boats. In most cases children are the ones who are made to collect water using boats.

People also use pitchers made from metal or plastic bottles to collect water. Though clay pitchers are a safer medium for water storage, their suitability is questionable for reasons of durability or fragility. Very few people thus use clay pitchers for collecting water. Chemical treatments like using *fittari* (potash alum), chlorination and iodine tablets are also popular practice in rural areas. Especially in areas where natural gas is not available as fuel, people prefer using *fittari* (alum) for water purification. Deep tube wells serve as a drinking water source in Bagerhat and Khulna districts, while in some areas of Bagerhat, Khulna and Barguna district local people purchase water from solar based PSF system. People from other districts are also aware about the PSF system and are willing to pay for safe drinking water.

There are both old and new styles of drinking water gathering technologies in use in the six study villages which include using ponds, tube wells, rain water harvesting, PSF, and solar-based PSF. However, blending indigenous and modern technologies has been working well (e.g. solar-based PSF and rain water harvesting systems). Moreover, in the coastal region there is no community based organization to ensure safe drinking water for all. Our study found that ownership is the primary reason. Nobody owns the community based water supply system, even those provided by GOs or NGOs. There are fewer than 3% of the households in the six districts that have taken collective initiatives to preserve drinking water.

Due to poor socio-economic condition, lack of education, and lack of rural institutions, the responsibility of providing water for the households primarily lies with the government and the NGOs. In fact, the activities of NGOs are also limited to easily accessible places, while the remote areas are completely neglected. Moreover the coastal areas are disaster prone. Thus, after any catastrophic event, most of the water sources become unusable. Hence, it is very difficult for the community people to keep them from becoming vulnerable. If solar based PSF water can be supplied through pipes to different collection points, people will pay for the facility. They can form a management committee where community people will be engaged in monitoring and maintaining solar-based PSF systems. Community-based organizations should be strengthened and ownership should be encouraged in these areas to improve the current situation of drinking water sources. Experts aver that the effects of catastrophic events like Aila, which are sure to recur, can endure for a long time horizon. This requires thinking of innovative and resilient water storage systems both at the technical and human community levels to mitigate their devastating effects.

The authors are affiliated with the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER), BRAC University.

Foreign borrowing by private sector

Nothing to be concerned about yet

ABUL BASHIR

THE private sector is now allowed to resort to external sources to obtain loans. In order to obtain loans from these sources a private company in Bangladesh needs approval from the *Scrutiny Committee of the Board of Investment*, which is chaired by the Governor of Bangladesh Bank. The issue has drawn notable attention of economic commentators as the amount of loans taken by private sector from external sources has been increasing in the recent years.

One pertinent question is, why does a private company resort to external sources for loans while the domestic banking sector has no liquidity problem to meet its demand? Bangladesh Bank has recently conducted a study on foreign borrowing of the private sector. They surveyed a representative sample of 13 firms from different sectors which have taken loan from external sources. The finding of the study suggests that the main reason for them for borrowing from foreign sources are because of lower interest rate compared to domestic sources; (external: $libor+3-4.5\%$, Domestic: $14\%-18\%$) and also because most local banks could not finance large projects, due to their limited capital base.

However, one must recognize that unlike borrowings from domestic sources, borrowings from external sources involve two costs. One is the agreed interest which is as mentioned above is about $libor+3-4.5\%$. *Libor* is the average rate of interest of intra-bank transaction of top 15 banks located in London during last one year, which usually remains less than 1 percent. So, the rate of interest a private company has to pay while borrowing from external sources will be about 5 percent. The second component of cost of borrowings from external sources is the foreign exchange cost. What investor gets against a US dollar in Bangladeshi taka at the time of borrowing is likely to be smaller than what he has to pay against a US dollar at the time of repayment. This difference refers to the second component of foreign borrowing.

Even with two components of total costs, borrowing from external sources is still cheaper compared to the borrowing from domestic sources. This situation is likely to prevail as long as the current stability of dollar-taka exchange rates remains more or less stable.

If the borrowing from external sources provides the private sector a window of opportunity to secure cheap loan, one legitimate question is then what is the

TABLE 1: SECTOR-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF APPROVED LOAN FROM EXTERNAL SOURCES (2009-2014)

Sector	Number of Companies	Total Sector-wise Approval (in Million USD*)
RMG/Related Products	98	693.7
Power	22	1028.8
Telecommunication/ISP	11	2356
Agricultural Products/Dairy Products/Food & Allied	11	127.2
Pharmaceuticals/Healthcare	8	140.5
Cement	7	85.5
Shipping, Water Transport, Cargo Handling	5	111
Packaging	4	6.2
Footwear	3	20
Electronic Goods Manufacturing	3	34
Air Transport	3	98.9
Steel	3	232.5
Conglomerate	1	365
Other	24	236.8
Total**	203	5336.25

Statistics Department, Bangladesh Bank. *Up to 27th March, 2014. **The number of companies is less than numbers of approvals, as some of the companies sought and were permitted to take foreign loans on multiple instances.

ground for being concerned about it? One of the main reason is there have been some instances where a country struggled to manage amount of dollar required to pay its total foreign borrowing. Such a situation depreciates local currency. The most recent example is India. Following the global economic and financial crisis of 2008, the government as well as the private sector took significant amount of short-term credit from the external sources. By the last quarter of 2013, India became liable to repay about 172 billion US dollar of its short-term credit. During the same time, the country had foreign exchange reserve of about 272 billion dollar. That is the amount of immediately payable debt of India accounted for about 64 percent of its total foreign exchange reserve. As a result, the value of rupee against dollar declined significantly for some time putting a brake on country's soaring economic power. East Asian financial crisis originated from a similar ground. This is the main reason why many economic

commentators are worried already with the growing trend of the private sector borrowing from the external sources.

According to Bangladesh Bank study, about 20 private enterprises got approval of USD 936.30 million loans in 2011 which increased to USD 1579.57 million (among 81 enterprises) in 2012 and further to USD 1555.33 million (among 116 enterprises) in 2013. According to the same study, the highest amount of borrowings from external sources have been approved in case of telecommunication sector, followed by power sector. Together they constituted more than 61 percent of total approval.

Both of these sectors serve the domestic markets and hence do not earn any foreign currency. As a result they have to buy dollar from the reserve maintained by Bangladesh Bank to repay their loan taken from external sources. In contrast, an export oriented company can repay its loan taken from external sources with its export earning creating any additional pressure on the foreign exchange reserve. As the current composition of total private sector borrowings from external sources is not dominated by export oriented sectors, the pressure on country's foreign exchange reserve can potentially increase with the growth of private sector borrowing from external sources. The Bangladesh Bank study also identified that due to exchange rate fluctuation some companies-which do not export, face losses in local currency since they need to pay in dollars. This is the main reason for visible concern among many economic commentators.

However, since the size of total borrowings of the private sector from external sources is still small relative to country's foreign exchange reserve, there is nothing to be worried yet. But government has to remain vigilant to foresee any formidable pressure on country's foreign exchange reserve before it is too late to avoid. At the same time, since borrowing from domestic sources are costly, and the country needs investment, borrowings from external sources by the private sector should be utilized by more. Especially, the export oriented companies should be encouraged to secure more loans from the external sources. At the same time, monitoring of the utilization of these loans should also be increased.

The writer is a Researcher at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), former economist, World Bank. Email: cccg67@yahoo.com

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte

QUOTABLE Quote

Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.

Winston Churchill

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Skill
- Korean or Thai
- Speed checker
- Score speed
- Atlanta school
- Bulls and bucks
- Wilde character
- Cut drastically
- Luau dish
- Made still
- NFL measures
- Reunion attendees
- Venice sight
- Humphrey's love
- Russian space station
- Piece keeper?
- Count start
- Coffee dispenser
- Bee groups
- Theater units
- Rolling Stones song
- Floor squares
- Plain silly
- Start
- Looks after

DOWN

- Unsettling
- Strict boss
- Handsome youth
- Going rate?
- Woodworking aid
- Cash dispenser
- Mermaid's home
- White Rabbit's plaint
- Summits
- Nudged, like a horse
- Some escape routes
- Cry of anticipation
- Wing
- New reporter
- Entice
- Historical records
- One of the Earps
- Not forgotten
- Views over
- Relish
- Last Stuart ruler
- Kickoff aid
- Retired plane

Yesterday's answer

ASIDE WALKS
FIDEL ALONE
CROCK RAVEN
NOSH BEET
CITY BRAT
HOW TOPMAST
ITALY MAKER
CANAPES ELI
NOON OSLO
FRAT DART
LICIT IBIZA
OPRAH MIMES
WAYNE STEEP

CRYPTOQUOTE 7-23

ONKU TPL FRU XT KYNWRIWJF TPLZ
FPKAE WE JPU KE WBHPZUKJU KE ONKU
TPLXRYBPBRXT KYNWRIWJF TPLZ FPKAE.
- QWF QWFAKZ

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY? FICTION
HAS TO MAKE SENSE.
- TOM CLANCY

KATALYST Improving business, improving lives

swisscontact

Request for Proposal

Katalyst is a market development project that aims to contribute to increasing the income of poor men and women in rural areas. It does this by facilitating changes in services, inputs and product markets, which in turn increases the competitiveness of farmers and small enterprises. Katalyst is co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the UK Government, and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). It is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh.

Katalyst is looking to finance innovative ideas in the following issue:
Sub-facilitation for implementing market development interventions related to "Promotion of Sustainable Culture Practice of Small Indigenous Species (SIS)"

Katalyst invites interested consulting firms, international and local non-governmental organisations, activation and events agencies with associated experience to submit innovative project proposal on this issue. The Request for Proposal, Sector Brief, and templates for proposal and budget are available at:
http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus_procurement.php