

# A path of 'principled pragmatism'

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, Professor Shafiqul Islam, Director, Water Diplomacy Program, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, talks to Nahela Nowshin about the challenges of water governance.

Where does Bangladesh stand in terms of evolution of water policies and what can it learn from the global discourse?

Integrated water resource management (IWRM) - a target of SDG 6 - has become the global mantra for water management. IWRM, conceived over 50 years ago, has become the "emperor" of the global water discourse. In clothing the metaphorical emperor, IWRM emphasises integration, decentralisation, participation, and economic sustainability. Yet, a closer look at implementation of IWRM in many regions of the world suggests that although the IWRM emperor seems to have clothes does the emperor need different clothes for different situations? What constitutes appropriate clothing and what criteria do we need to evaluate the effectiveness of clothing of the IWRM emperor?

It appears that generic IWRM type policy interventions that many countries in Asia and Africa have adopted under the influence of global water discourse have produced doubtful outcomes. We need to ask what (and how) types of IWRM will help Bangladesh to address water problems within Bangladesh (say, community based water management in southwestern region) or between Bangladesh and India.

The lesson Bangladesh may learn from the global experience is the gap between the principles and pragmatism of water management. There is a growing consensus that the existing global paradigm, like IWRM, neither responds well to the priorities of the small-scale water users in developing countries like Bangladesh, nor does it resonate well with local and regional conditions, which makes implementing community based participation, reforming property rights, and allocating water at basin level nearly impossible.

An analysis of different historical trajectories of water development and water management in Bangladesh as well as interactions with donors - from the abolishment of Zamindari systems in the 1950s to establishment of coastal embankment projects in the 1960s to early implementation projects of the

1980s to system rehabilitation projects of the 2000s - it appears that the project-based focus of different water institutions in Bangladesh has led to less than ideal organisational coherence and institutionalised knowledge and experience sharing across units and project offices.

Given so many challenges, how do you suggest we prioritise our resources and attention in the short-run to manage water resources most effectively?

Addressing the ever increasing supply-demand gap, providing access of water in urban slums, and developing adaptation and mitigation strategies for a changing climate - what do these three problems have in common? In a colloquial sense, these problems are complex. But, what makes these problems complex? What do we need to address these problems for actionable outcome?

Complex problems - addressing supply-demand gap in the dry season in southwestern region or providing equitable access of

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Professor Shafiqul Islam

water in the slums of Dhaka or creating sustainable development pathways for a growing population in a changing climate - are connected with many competing and often conflicting values, interests, and tools. These problems can't be addressed either by dogmatic principles or by deal-making pragmatism.

We need to recognise that because these problems are interconnected and interdependent, the solution can't be pre-specified. Any intervention will require an attention to both principles and pragmatism. Principle without pragmatism is often not actionable; pragmatism without principle is not sustainable.

We need to continually assess the context of the problem with a goal in mind: to logically order principles to best achieve them in practice. There are issues like agriculture versus aquaculture in the southwest that are subjected to deal-making while others like sustainability of Sundarbans or equitable access of water to local community are not.

Not all principles need to be equally important in all situations. Yet, principles are important and can't be ignored completely irrespective of contexts. If we do, we fall into the slippery slope of end justifying the means. When we say, we will not compromise our principles to explain our opposition to a public policy, we are confounding two meanings of compromise. A pragmatic compromise - a settlement of differences in interests - is not the same as compromising one's guiding principles. Compromise over interests is possible and actionable while compromise over principles is not sustainable.

Each context should lead us to reconsider which of our guiding principles - commitment to a sustainable water future and equitable access to water - to privilege and which to temporarily subordinate. The result is an effective integration of realism and idealism that we may call *principled pragmatism*.

This notion of principled pragmatism is what we need to address complex problems of our time. For example, water availability

during the dry season may be the limiting factor to ensure access to water for rivers flowing from India to Bangladesh. Mismatches between values, choice of tools, and disparity in scales usually make water management decisions complex with no clear-cut solution.

In such situations, a principled pragmatic approach - that can address mismatch between values (Is water more important to keep a port functional than sustaining the Sundarbans?) or choice of tools (Is building the Ganges barrage better than implementing high efficiency irrigation systems?) - grounded in translating global norms in terms of local understanding and the capacity to act on them is our way forward.

Decision-making is highly centralised in Bangladesh where there are only a few entities that deal with water resource management. What are some ways we can empower organisations at the local level?

Given the informal nature of water economy, power inequalities and domination of elite interests at the local level decentralisation of decision-making and operations and maintenance of water projects through local government institutions - as opposed to through independently commissioned water management organisations - is likely to be more sustainable in Bangladesh. Many water infrastructure development efforts over the last several decades have entered into this so-called "build-neglect-rebuild" cycle - to cite a few regional examples in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India. The key issue is to recognise that working only through public sector organisations, this cycle will most likely continue because they can't provide sufficient resources to operate and maintain these projects over time. To exit this cycle, Bangladesh needs to adopt a systematic approach where resources are made available only if investment design includes continuous capacity building through learning by doing, and post-investment monitoring protocols for adaptive maintenance.

## A letter to Molly

In May 2016, eight-year-old Molly (not her real name) was brutally raped by an 18-year-old. She was taken to hospital in a critical condition. With treatment and care she survived. But despite relentless efforts by an organisation's legal unit that had filed a case against the rapist, the case was settled out of court because Molly's family had been threatened with dire consequences otherwise. The writer expresses her frustration and helplessness through this letter to the child.

FARISA KABIR

Dear Molly,

Hope you are well. I hear you will be enrolling in a new school this year. Your father tells me that you have been living with your grandmother for the past six months. It must be hard being away from home. Have you made any friends in your new school?

I am sure you are happy to leave the dreaded year of 2016 behind you. We cannot imagine what you had to endure. This tragedy, both physically and mentally, should not happen to anyone, let alone a child of eight years. We hope you have begun to heal, despite everything.

I am writing with new bad news though, to tell you that we have failed you.

Your family has decided to settle your rape case out of court.

We are sorry.

To be honest, I cannot say that I blame them. The pressure from the community was just too much for them to handle. Your father has been receiving threatening phone calls ever since the rapist was arrested. Your uncles were beaten up. Everyone around them was telling them to drop the case. The fight for justice is a lonely battle indeed.

Your family finally gave in. They signed an "agreement" saying that they will withdraw the case and for this they will be paid Taka 350,000. In return, the community leaders have promised to evict the rapist and their family from the village. I hear that the rapist's



house has already been dismantled.

Our staff have been there to help you and the family since that dreaded night. They ran with you from hospital to hospital as you lay there unconscious, bleeding profusely. When your father finally reached Madaripur, we took him to the police station to file a case. The police arrested the rapist that very night. We were patting ourselves on the back as you

stabilised and the rapist was behind bars. We even appeared in court and stood beside the Public Prosecutor as he opposed bail.

The rapist is still behind bars until this day, but that is about to change. The case against him will collapse as you will not be taken to court to give testimony. The Medical Examiner will not be called in to corroborate your story. The case will not come up for trial

without follow up. The rapist will be freed. This is not just your story. It is the story of hundreds and thousands of women and girls. Last year alone, at least two women and girls were raped in Bangladesh every day. And that's just the ones that were brave enough to report. The rate of conviction is despicably alarming. People refuse to come forward because of the fear of persecution, the fear of

being judged and the thought of languishing in the corridors of the court waiting for justice for who knows how long.

Molly, we cannot say what the future holds for you. We hope and pray you will one day have a normal life. Yet the reality is that even if you recover mentally, there will be rapists like your attacker, targeting other victims and many times they will go scot free.

We wish we could have done more for you. Forgive us Molly. We have failed you. Take care, beautiful child.

From all of us who let you down.

We do pledge that we will raise our voices so loudly that such acts do not go unpunished in the future. A heinous violation against any woman or girl should not be "settled", even by a proactive community who promises to banish the rapist from the village. No amount should ever be enough where a girl's life is torn to shreds causing irreparable damage. Any such act of vigilante justice does not acknowledge the pain and suffering of the girl and ensures that the perpetrator is given his freedom after a few months of inconvenience to their life by being in prison. For victims and survivors of rape and other cases of violence, it is important for justice to be delivered with speed and a strong hand. The message this will send will be loud and clear... "we mean business and you will not get away with it!" Till that happens, rapists and other perpetrators will continue to cause harm and destroy innocent lives.

The writer is leading BRAC's Human rights and legal aid services programme.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**FRANZ KAFKA, THE TRIAL**  
GERMAN-LANGUAGE WRITER OF NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES, WIDELY REGARDED AS ONE OF THE MAJOR FIGURES OF 20TH-CENTURY LITERATURE.

*It's only because of their stupidity that they're able to be so sure of themselves.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

Across

- Steer clear of
- Wrong
- Sign after Virgo
- Circle spokes
- Contemptuous look
- Boat's back
- "Don't look--!"
- Look upon
- Rural worker
- Track shape
- Chatty bird
- Puerto --
- Head out
- Make level
- Region
- Some band members
- Chair part
- Wild guess
- Raring to go
- Mean-spirited
- Impassive one
- Down
- Golfer Ernie

2 Coq au-  
3 Lincoln nickname  
4 Region of reverie  
5 Third planet  
6 Weapons store  
7 Small rug  
8 Midmonth day  
9 Royal address  
10 Trig function  
16 Atlas page  
18 Golf cry  
19 Tel --  
20 Track event  
21 Exceptional fella  
24 Exceptional  
25 Finished  
26 Brewed drinks  
28 Baby's room  
31 Deposit  
34 Creates  
35 Diving bird  
36 Poet/Pound  
37 Olympus group  
40 Butterfly catcher  
42 In the past  
43 Hawaiian souvenir  
44 Circle part

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

S	A	D	A	T	B	L	A	C	K
E	P	O	C	H	R	E	R	A	N
N	O	R	M	A	A	W	A	R	E
S	L	E	E	T	S	B	E	E	
E	L	M	S	E	T	T	L	E	S
D	O	I	L	E	H	R	E	R	
			P	I	D	A	Y		
P	R	O	F	I	T	H	A	T	
M	A	I	D	E	N	S	O	R	E
E	G	G	G	R	O	W	L	S	
T	O	G	A	S	I	S	L	E	T
A	D	E	L	E	C	L	I	N	E
L	A	D	L	E	H	O	N	E	D

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

HOW'S MY HAIR RESTORATION TONIC DOING?  
IT DOESN'T IMPRESS ME.  
THE LABEL DOES SAY THERE MIGHT BE SIDE EFFECTS.  
GREG + MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

WHEN REALLY LOVES THAT ROCKING HORSE?  
YEAH.  
SHE REALLY REALLY LOVES IT.  
COME ON, SWEETHEART, TIME FOR A NEW DIAPER.  
SHE MIGHT EVEN LOVE IT A LITTLE TOO MUCH.  
D'WON'T DISMOUNT!