



PHOTO: CIRCLEOFBLUE

## REFRAMING OF AN ELEPHANT TO A CAMEL

# Addressing water scarcity

SHAFIQUL ISLAM

Is Bangladesh water scarce?  
Is Bangladesh water secure?  
Is Bangladesh water sustainable?



For an issue advocate, an activist or an opportunist, answers to these questions may range from an overwhelming yes to an emphatic no. A pragmatist will most likely suggest: it depends!

Of course, it depends. But, it depends on what? Why (and how) do we get yes and no as answers for the same question? This is partly because of our search for certainty and clear-cut solution for problems we face. For simple problems, where cause-effect relationships are well understood, this search for a yes-no solution works very well. However, for complex problems, this certainty does not exist.

Can we address ever the increasing supply-demand gap through the lens of water scarcity? Can we provide access of water to urban slums through the lens of water security? Can we develop adaptation and mitigation strategies for a changing climate through the lens of sustainability? 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?

### The Blind Men and the Elephant

These complex questions of water scarcity, security, and sustainability are in many ways a modern-day manifestation of The Blind Men and the Elephant, a timeless parable that originated centuries ago in the Indian Subcontinent and has since diffused worldwide.

In the tale, a group of blind men touch various parts of an elephant to learn what it is like. Each man feels one and only one part, such as the tusk or the tail, and upon discussing, they quickly discover that their individual experiences are in complete disagreement with one another.

The moral of the parable is simple: the elephant is a complex beast; thus, no one blind man can fully comprehend it through touching it once. To see the complete picture, any given blind man must rely not only on his own

experience, but also on the experiences of others.

In the early 1970s, the leading cause of childhood mortality in Bangladesh was diarrhoeal diseases. Due to inadequate sanitation infrastructure, the untreated surface water that the majority of the population used for their daily needs was contaminated with a variety of disease-causing agents. To address this issue, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) initiated a project in 1972 to build shallow tube wells that provided clean water.

By 1980, over one million tube wells had been installed—a number that then grew 10-fold in the decade that followed. At the time, it was unknown to UNICEF that the same wells that prevented diarrhoeal disease so effectively in these rural Bangladeshi communities were also giving them arsenic poisoning.

Shallow tube wells, as we found out later, are prone to arsenic contamination. By the time symptoms started to appear in the 1980s, tube wells had already become the primary water source for millions of Bangladeshis –

resulting in what the WHO has since called “the largest mass poisoning of a population in history”.

The shallow tube well project, as well as the testing and education campaign that followed nearly three decades later in 1999, serve as ill-fated examples of a metaphorical blind man's simple solutions to a complex problem.

In both 1972 and 1999, we failed to consider the experiences of the local population. Both the initial well installation project and the well painting campaign were designed for rural Bangladeshi communities instead of with them. As a result, we did not fully recognise the potential ramifications of either intervention – or how those ramifications would compound over time and marginalise users in the process.

Today, these communities still live with the negative impacts of these interventions, and like the elephant, providing access to safe water in rural Bangladesh has proven to be complex. Each intervention outlined above addressed whatever issue was most evident—first, under-five mortality and

then, arsenic poisoning. However, by focusing solely on the immediate, context was disregarded and complexity was dismissed—and the people continue to feel the repercussions of this neglect. After all, just because the blind man only feels a tusk does not mean that the tail ceases to exist.

Our challenge is to acknowledge that we have discovered the tusk, but to also be aware that we may have missed the tail. We must be willing to consider and adopt interventions appropriate for particular contexts, because it is nearly impossible to find a simple and permanent solution to complex problems. We need to search and find contingent approaches to resolve complex water problems.

### A search for the 18th Camel

In our search to address complex problems of our time, we need to reframe our Blind Men and the Elephant story to another age-old fable from the Middle East: The 18th Camel. A wealthy man left his herd of camels to his three sons, allocating half for the first, one-third for the middle, and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

**Awards aren't given out just like that!**

A journey of over 60 years...  
Trusted by millions of mothers...  
The best powder milk brand **DANO**®

DANO  
Full Cream Milk Powder  
ALL NATURAL MILK GOODNESS  
DANO NO.1 MILK BRAND 2016

\*based on research by Millward Brown and Bangladesh Brand Forum