How to reduce air pollution effectively

POLIN KUMAR SAHA

ENSURING clean air is one of the major environmental challenges in Bangladesh's larger cities. Although air quality management is a key component of environmental issues, its mismanagement may have a huge adverse impact on the overall socioeconomic development of a country. Recent evidence shows that air quality is deteriorating in many parts of the world, with low- and middle-income countries especially susceptible to the danger.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 98 percent cities of low- and middle-income countries do not meet the WHO air quality guidelines, while this percentage decreases to 56 percent in high-income countries. However, in a study on the air quality standards of 3,000 cities in 103 countries, some major Bangladeshi cities like Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Chittagong, Barisal, Khulna and Sylhet were placed at the top of the list. In general, the air quality of these cities has a high impact on public health, increasing chances of stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and chronic and acute respiratory diseases, including asthma.

To understand the importance of air quality management in the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), we need to take note of two particular goals—SDG 3 and SDG 11—in which air pollution is mentioned specifically. But the issue has many drivers and relevant sustainability impacts connecting almost 14 out of the 17 SDGs set by the United Nations. These goals and related targets and indicators are connected with several drivers, while the best outcome of ensuring clean air can be achieved through an integrated approach of air quality management. Otherwise, the dream behind the SDGs will remain unfulfilled.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

We are facing an increasing level of dust pollutants around us, which is gradually becoming a serious health hazard with other pollutants in the air.

In our cities, air pollution usually becomes most severe in the dry season (winter). If the city air pollution level is considered between summer and winter, then the control strategy should be separated from the overall management policy. The types of local pollutants and seasonal public health status could be assessed for effective air quality management. However, a control mechanism can be suggested in the context of our country, which requires that air-polluted cities are continuously evaluated and effective local measures are implemented. In general, there should be a strategy covering all aspects of air quality management in all the cities. The country's clean air act, for example, could be used based on multi-criteria evaluation conducted by multi-stakeholders.

Determining the priority pollutants helps develop the strategy for air quality control. In the context of location-specific pollutants, health problems arising from poor air quality will be measured to form a location-specific solution. For example, context-specific control system can be developed in areas where they are industrial zones, waste disposal sites, construction sites, marketplaces, etc. So, it's very important to identify the sources of air pollutants.

In our cities, we face an increasing level of dust pollutants around us, which is gradually becoming a serious health hazard with other pollutants in the air. So, developing a cost-effective air control strategy must involve incorporating control measures based on minimising the source points of dust as well. Other major source points—brick kilns, solid waste, construction (road and building mainly), and transportation system—should also be kept in mind considering the SDG targets and indicators.

On a personal level, citizens can also help reduce air pollution. They can, for example, drive less or wisely (e.g. avoiding unnecessary driving, using fuel-efficient vehicles and public transports, walking, cycling, etc.), promote home deliveries (e.g. online selling, buying, etc.), promote plantation (e.g. growing trees, gardening, etc.), and also ensure waste disposal in a sustainable manner (e.g. disposing waste in the way advised by waste removal experts).

However, an integrated system has to be developed to get better response in city air quality management. Under the sustainable framework, an air management system must satisfy three broad categories of requirements—environmental, engineering and economic sustainability. We have many constructive policies, rules and regulations for air quality management, but we lack enough programmes of compliance and enforcement, which not only reduce air pollution, but also help the owners of source points get information required for their control mechanism and also to further develop and update their system.

The government should expand the mechanism to target all types of polluters and may offer economic incentives to reduce pollution at all levels of the points of origin.

Usually, our policymakers take a conventional regulatory approach to the air control system. This system mainly sets specific standards for polluters in the industrial sectors. This may be a good step for one sector only, but the government should expand the mechanism to target all types of polluters and may offer economic incentives to reduce pollution at all levels of the points of origin. Though, currently, a limited incentive mechanism exists, but it can be expanded to include various programmes and events such as emission-related tax incentives, subsidies for waste treatment, deposit refund systems for disposal of different types of waste, etc.

Finally, our control strategy relies heavily on the regulatory authorities functioning within the SDG framework when we should, actually, encourage greater participation of the public in the system. With proper guidance, knowledge and motivation, the public can be made a crucial part of the air quality management.

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The right to choose

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

A single mom still remains looked down upon, even if she is providing for her family and her off-springs. Even when the biological father has nothing to contribute—financially or emotionally—the child still needs a father's name, be it in school or later on in life.

I have been asked this question a couple of times: Is women's clothing linked to their empowerment? I understand how in many cases when a woman who has been confined to a piece of cloth for decades feels empowered when she finally sheds it. However, my answer to this particular question is always a big fat no.

Whether a woman wears a miniskirt or a hijab, what she wears has no correlation to empowerment or even disempowerment, under common circumstances. It is however linked to how she thinks, and how the people around her respond to her thoughts that leads to her sense of confidence, that ultimately helps her achieve empowerment.

Another less discussed issues when we talk about women's empowerment is divorce. What is the link between divorce and empowerment of women, if any? Luckily for us, there is research that may guide us towards a particular answer. But I can only refer to those carried out in other parts of the world, as there is still a lack of proper research in the context of Bangladesh. Most research studies however come to the conclusion that while the number of divorces has increased substantially worldwide (doubling over the last decade in Bangladesh alone), there is no evidence to suggest that it directly leads to empowerment of women.

Yes, the growing trends of divorce certainly hint at the number of women speaking out about unhappy marriages, and yes, it cannot be denied that for a woman who can support herself and her children financially the option of divorce (if her situation forces her to do so) is more viable than for a woman who is not as financially sound. On the contrary, a woman in general feels empowered not when she gets a divorce (because she would probably not get it even if she is financially stable), but when her family and those around her support her decision and choices in life—meaning when she feels accepted.

To think that divorce would lead to empowerment of any kind might even be naïve to a certain extent, because let's face it, marriage in our part of the world, more than anything else, acts as a society-approved umbrella, a means of remaining "secure" and obtaining a status of respectability. A single mom still remains looked down upon, even if she is providing for her family and her off-springs. Even when the biological father has nothing to contribute—financially or emotionally—the child still needs a father's name, be it in school or later on in life. A divorcee is someone who is socially excluded and let's not even go into the life of a divorcee woman—that's a discussion that merits a separate article.

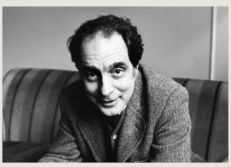
Research also shows that when both partners in a conjugal relationship earn and contribute to the family, there are better chances of them sticking it out because they are more prepared, and have more to offer to themselves as well as their family because of their spending capacity, which may be more than that of a single-income family.

The fact that a woman who earns can bail out of her marriage if need be much more easily compared to a woman who does not earn, cannot be denied. But yes, every case is different. A woman might come out of her marriage and feel like she has control over her life and circumstances all over again; but to think that divorce in itself is closely associated to empowerment might be stretching it a bit too far.

Long story short, covering one's legs or not, sporting a tattoo or not, even earning one's own living does not make a woman feel empowered. Empowerment is a social process—it is the right to make one's choices, and feel confident about owning them. It is not being blamed for it, or being called names for it. It is not when a man says, "Women these days have it all, what are they complaining about?" or when he says, "I no longer approach women in fear of another #MeToo campaign." It is about women taking a stand for themselves and their rights and men supporting them, celebrating them. So yes, contrary to popular belief, divorce does not necessarily lead to empowerment of women—what makes her feel empowered is *her* knowing for sure that it is her right to make her choices, and that she will not be questioned for it.

Syeda Samara Mortada is an advocate for equal rights and a development practitioner.

QUOTABLE Quote



ITALO CALVINO

Italian journalist and writer of short stories and novels

You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.
- Invisible Cities

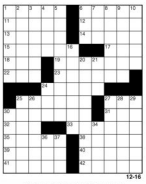
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 "Ivanhoe" author
6 Pancake order
11 Debussy work
12 Hammerin' Hank
13 Papas of "Z"
14 First-rate
15 Beat
17 Ready to go
18 Application
19 Depot purchases
22 Lobster trap
23 Some synthetics
24 Street borders
25 Freshman's cap
27 102, in old Rome
30 Crate
31 Break off
32 That girl
33 Nautilus shape
35 Came to
38 Came to
38 Bring together
39 Singing voice, in slang
40 Polite refusal
41 Play place
42 Patellae places

DOWN

1 Goof
2 Opera legend
3 Brunch dish
4 Addition column
5 Wood-pecker's target
6 Easy victim
7 Sticky stuff
8 Up
9 Astronomical sightings
10 Shoelace problems
16 Personal logs
20 Sci-fi genre
21 Ring wins
24 Give the ax
25 Erred big-time
26 Moon of Jupiter
27 Deep red
28 How some games end
29 Lazy ones
30 Cowboy wear
34 A party to
36 Gunpowder holder
37 Jargon ending



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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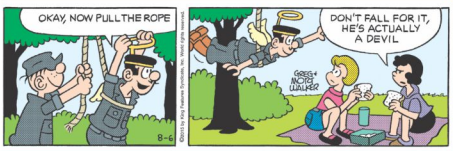
BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES — BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT