

Need to invest in mental health

Improve services at the mental health institutes

There is no denying the importance of the awareness of mental illness as a growing health concern in Bangladesh. According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders affect 16.1 percent of adults and 18.4 percent of children in the country. Despite the enormity of the issue and the need for improved services, Bangladesh seems to be walking in the opposite direction. As a report by *The Daily Star* on October 10 shows, mental health institutes are failing to provide necessary services. The Pabna Mental Hospital, the country's first specialised hospital for patients suffering from mental illnesses, is grossly underfunded and understaffed, with only 14 doctors, although there is a stated need for 111 doctors and experts. The demand for services grew manifold since the 200-bed facility was turned into a 500-bed one some 21 years ago, but there has been no change in the quality or quantity of services. Imagine the sufferings that patients have to go through as a result.

This is more or less the picture in all our mental health institutes. According to a UN survey published in May, the share of GDP given to health in Bangladesh has fallen from 1.1 percent in 2010 to 0.8 percent in 2017, and is now the lowest among 21 countries of south, southwest and southeast Asia. The share of the national budget allocated to health has been shrinking consistently—and only a fraction of that budget is spent on mental health. Failure to acknowledge the gravity of mental health issues, however, seems to be a national phenomenon. Patients often talk about how they have to face the double whammy of poor services at hospital and poor treatment at home, by family members. This needs to change if we are to tackle the growing mental health problem with any degree of success.

Little being done to reduce inequality

It is undermining social and economic progress

As per Oxfam's latest "Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index", Bangladesh ranked 148 among 157 (where a lower number means better performance) countries surveyed. That means we are only ahead of a handful of countries like Bhutan and trailing other countries in the region that includes the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal. The index is based on government action on social spending, tax and labour rights, which are considered essential to reduce the gap. We have not done well on social spending (score 146), slightly better on taxation (103) and dismal on labour rights (148). Those countries in the world where governments are taking strong policy measures to fight inequality are doing better. In Bangladesh, taxation is neither gender sensitive nor are we broadening our tax base to bring more people under the tax net.

Bangladesh scored very poorly on labour practices. Readymade garments sector, which is by far one of the largest employer of workers, is an area that needs greater focus. Workers are entitled to Tk 5,300 (USD 68) per month which happens to be the lowest minimum wage of all garment workers globally. It is also far below the living wage demanded by RMG workers. But then workers in other sectors are entitled to Tk 1,500 (USD 19) per month, which means they are even worse off.

The wage gap in the country is widening and the government should formulate plans to increase progressive taxation and clamp down on tax dodging by both institutions and individuals. There is a need to give more rights to workers by allowing greater unionisation in industry and putting a check on poor labour practices. Finally, the government needs to seriously increase spending on health, education and broaden overall social safety net programmes.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Pay attention to UN climate change report

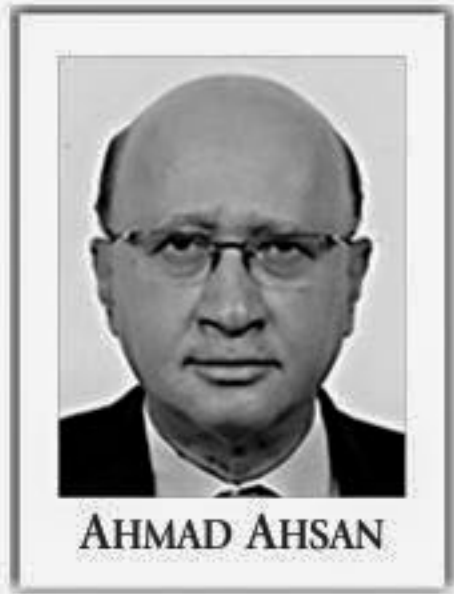
The world media is now talking about the report on climate change released by the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), a part of the United Nations. The report has warned of the far-reaching effects of climate change such as drought, wildfire and scarcity of food, to name a few. The ongoing destruction of our environment has to stop.

The world over should come together and take up the collective responsibility of saving Planet Earth by reducing energy consumption keeping the IPCC report in mind. The international community must work together for a greener world for future generations..

P. Senthil Saravana Durai, By e-mail

The spectacular rise of East Asia

What can Bangladesh learn?



When the history of our times is written, the spectacular rise of East Asia will be a towering landmark. In the 1950s and even into the 1960s, East Asia was a desperately poor region, recovering from the devastation of World War II. Even in 1990, the developing countries of East Asia (i.e. East Asia excluding Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei) had high poverty rates. Nearly 60 percent of the region's people lived in extreme poverty as defined internationally (living below purchasing power parity dollar of 1.90 in 2011 prices).

From that precarious position, the region reduced poverty dramatically. By 2015, developing East Asia's poverty rate had fallen to about four percent, lifting nearly 900 million people out of poverty. In 1990, the first year we could compare incomes using PPP dollars, China and Vietnam's per-capita incomes were both about 13 percent lower than India's and 17 percent higher than Bangladesh's. In the last 25 years, the picture changed profoundly as developing East Asia's per-capita income grew twice as fast as South Asian per-capita incomes. Today, East Asia's middle-class of around 1.5 billion makes up half of the global middle-class. The region has emerged as an undisputed global economic powerhouse accounting for nearly a third of the world's GDP and close to half of the global growth over the past five years.

Alongside income gains, the quality of life also improved rapidly. Life expectancy in developing East Asia increased from 45 years at the end of World War II to more than 70 by 1999, a goal which South Asia has not yet achieved—although, very creditably, Bangladesh has done so. By 1970, East Asia achieved universal primary education—30 years before South Asia. By 2000, secondary school enrolment was 60 percent. Technological progress followed whereas in 1990, developing East Asian nations supplied less than three percent of the world's exports of capital goods. This share has now increased by nearly 10 times.

Consider Vietnam. Ten years ago, it exported virtually no electrical and machinery goods, but last year Vietnam exported more than USD 77 billion's worth of these products.

What are the lessons of this extraordinary East Asian experience, sometimes called the "East Asian miracle"?

First, the countries focused on fundamentals: low deficits, inflation, and interest rates; competitive exchange rates; adequate public revenue for investment which provided economic stability and confidence for investors. Indonesia,

Thailand, and Vietnam raised 20 percent of their GDP in tax revenues compared to 10 percent by India (central government) and Pakistan and eight percent by Bangladesh. They saved and invested furiously, on average, more than 35 percent of their GDP over the past 30 years. In South Asia investments were about 25 percent and savings rates were even lower.

Second, public-private partnerships played a key role. Private sector and public enterprises grew side by side, supported by high rates of public investment that were more than twice the average of other developing countries. By 2000, 90 percent of East Asians had access to electricity, and per-capita energy use quadrupled which was three times higher than South Asia. Cities proliferated as the urban population increased by 600 million raising the urban population share to 53 percent by 2015. South Asia lagged far behind with only a third of the population living in cities.



Taiwan is one of the Four Asian Tigers known for their rapid industrialisation and exceptionally high growth rates between the early 1960s and 1990s.

Third, East Asians embraced globalisation by vigorously exporting to world markets and attracting a huge flow of foreign direct investment. Even as late as in the 1970s, exports and imports in both South and East Asia were similar—about eight to nine percent of their GDP. Thirty years later, in 2006, the situation had changed completely. East Asian exports accounted for 40 percent of their GDP, while imports accounted for 33 percent of GDP compared to 20 percent and 25 percent respectively in South Asia.

Crucially, East Asian economies were also highly integrated regionally with almost half their trade taking place amongst themselves. Over the past 25 years, developing East Asian economies received six times more FDI than South Asian economies.

Fourth, East Asian development was inclusive. Although inequality has increased in these countries in recent years, growth was broadly shared over the longer horizon. Many of these economies,

difference with South Asia is the role of East Asia's women. On average, during the past quarter century, more than 60 percent of working-age women worked there, compared to less than 30 percent in South Asia. Consider that if other things remained the same and women in South Asia worked in the same proportion as in East Asia, per-capita incomes could be about 27 percent higher.

Finally, East Asia used its demographic dividend well. As health improved and workers became more educated, dependency ratios fell sharply in the region. Labour, land, and capital markets worked flexibly to provide more new productive jobs for the more educated and healthier workforce in new industries and services that now employ more than 70 percent of workers. In South Asia, this shift has been far more gradual, with nearly 45 percent of workers still employed in agriculture.

What motivated these countries to develop so single-mindedly? One answer,

Independence deepened the land reforms of 1949, overthrew Pakistani oligarchy, and loosened bureaucratic inertia. In the 1970s, Bangladesh also faced significant left-wing communist insurgencies challenging the established order. In East Asia, perhaps partly in response to these challenges, there was better economic management, higher investment in rural infrastructure and human development, greater female participation in education and work, and labour-intensive exported-oriented industry. These similarities suggest that the lessons of East Asia may have special relevance for Bangladesh. I once witnessed a senior Japanese official assert during a discussion of global development issues that Bangladesh was more like an East Asian country than a South Asian one, and was happy to agree silently.

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INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

EMPOWER GIRLS

Before, during and after conflicts



Women and girls are central to the success, growth and prosperity of any country. They often constitute the largest population group in a society and have immense and equal potential to contribute in the development of their country. There is a broad range of evidence from well-developed countries which suggests that empowering women, economically, politically and socially, has direct benefits for economic growth and leads to sustained increase in income levels.

However, women empowerment does not happen in a vacuum nor does it occur in isolation. It starts from a very early stage, especially in the formative years of life when brain and personality development is still in process. It is in the young girls that the seeds of self-confidence and healthy self-esteem have to be sowed. It is from the very beginning, in early years of childhood, that girls have to be brought up having equal opportunities as boys with strong self-awareness. They need to be equally valued, respected and accepted for who they are rather than how they are expected to be.

Scientific research suggests that as soon as a girl child is enrolled in primary school, her social conditioning starts. She is restricted to dress, behave, play and even eat like girls. These discriminatory attitudes are debilitating and weaken the naturally gifted potential of a girl child. They are also prevalent everywhere—to varying degrees across different contexts but they pose one of the greatest



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challenges of our times.

Today, there are 1.1 billion girls in the world who deserve equal opportunities, chances and prospects for a better future. However, a vast majority of them live in deplorable conditions, often stuck in a perpetual cycle of poverty, discrimination and even violence. Every 10 minutes, somewhere in the world, a girl dies of violence. Out of the 60 million out-of-school primary-aged children in the world, 50 percent are girls. Across the world, girls are more likely than boys never to set foot in the classroom. Even today, in 2018 when technology has taken human discovery to new heights, there are still many communities and families across the world who

prefer boys' education over girls, provide early and better food to their sons before the daughters get to eat, and provide access to medical health facilities only to the male child. This happens due to a deep-rooted mindset of son preference which not only grossly neglects the needs of a girl child but also puts girls at an extremely high risk of malnutrition and disease, lack of education and hence self-reliance. In humanitarian emergencies, gender-based violence often increases subjecting girls to sexual and physical violence, trafficking, child marriage and exploitation. Adolescent girls in conflict settings are 90 percent more likely to be out of school as compared to girls in normal, conflict-free settings. This severely compromises their future prospects of acquiring financial autonomy and making the right choices later in life. This is the biggest opportunity as this constituency of 1.1 billion girls can play a transformative, life-changing role in shaping the future of their families, communities and countries at large.

On this Day of the Girl Child, we all have a collective moral obligation and responsibility to come together as a human family and re-commit ourselves to ensuring that our girls, irrespective of their colour, caste, geography and economy, are well-protected, nurtured, educated, well-fed and celebrated. They have the energy, vibrancy and creativity the world badly needs to overcome all its difficult and complex problems. Young girls are brimming with talent and potential and like everyone else they too have dreams and desires to be fulfilled.

We all have to do our bit and play our part. Governments have to come up with policies and development programmes which prioritise the needs of women and girls. These programmes have to be adequately well-resourced so they can result in tangible gains for disadvantaged girls. For development practitioners, girls-focused and sex-disaggregated data has to be an important part of prioritisation and designing of interventions, directly benefiting girls. Social activists have to forge partnerships with public influencers, politicians and media to ensure that no matter what happens, the rights of a girl child will always be fulfilled. Her voice will always be heard for she is as unique as anyone else and deserves to be celebrated. The world can benefit and heal so much with #GirlPower.

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