

A public health threat of epic proportions

Even the milk we're consuming is not safe

IN yet another report that depicts the sorry state of food quality in the country, it was learnt that raw cow milk contains unusually high levels of pesticide, antibiotic and bacteria, according to a study conducted by the National Food Safety Laboratory of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. A whopping 96 percent of raw milk and 66-80 percent of packed milk were found to contain bacteria. And what's more, the presence of heavy metals in milk was traced to the source, i.e. cattle feed—of which around 69 percent was found to have high levels of chromium—and pesticide traced back to grass and other agricultural feeds.

The threat that this poses to public health cannot be put into words. It is hard to believe that millions of people are regularly consuming milk that is most likely contaminated and contains extremely toxic substances. This could lead to a horde of diseases ranging from rash to cancer.

Unfortunately, the nature of the problem is so complex that there is no easy short-term solution. But the fact that such a large percentage of milk is contaminated points to the absence of an effective monitoring mechanism which could have prevented adulterated milk from infiltrating the market. This has clearly gone on for so long that the problem has now snowballed. The health ministry needs to take notice and act on the High Court order made yesterday, which directed the concerned government authorities to conduct a survey to determine the extent to which milk and curd in the market have lead, antibiotic and bacteria. All contaminated milk must be withdrawn from the market. The Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution must also step in and conduct drives to investigate the extent to which packed milk in the market is contaminated, and take action against companies that are selling adulterated food products. Moreover, there is an urgent need to launch mass awareness-raising programmes to educate farmers and feed manufacturers about the dangers of excessive use of antibiotics and pesticides.

Spend on education, health and social welfare

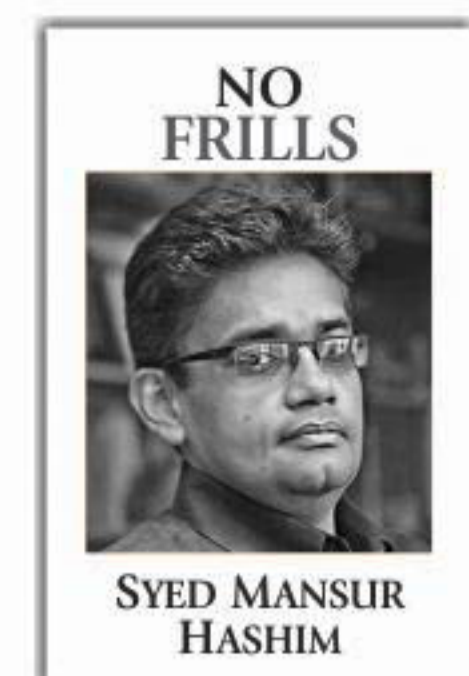
Quality investment needed for inclusive growth

DESPITE Bangladesh's remarkable economic development gains, the country's performance in some socio-economic indicators is far from ideal. While we have had public investment in development projects, the same priority needs to be shown towards education, healthcare and social protection. As a dialogue event by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on Sunday pointed out, without ensuring adequate public investment in these areas, the benefits of our economic growth will remain unequally distributed.

That the idea of development includes more than just economic factors has been a fact acknowledged by economists for a long time. That quality education and health and wellbeing are as important has been reflected in, for example, the UNDP's Human Development Index and in the SDGs. But, as speakers in the event highlighted, Bangladesh is far from being able to offer quality healthcare to its citizens. Our literacy rate has increased, but the focus on quality of education has been missing. This has been borne out by studies which have found that a large section of students are exhibiting below-standard performance, especially when it comes to English and math. Cost overruns and delays characterise our big projects. Our social security programmes are inadequate and, in many cases, plagued by corruption. The benefits of our development have not been equally shared, income inequality is widening, and employment opportunities are not enough for the increasing workforce. And above all, a culture of denial and blame-shifting has taken root in our administration.

The ruling Awami League, in its third consecutive term in power, is in the unique position of being able to build on its successes and address its shortcomings. It needs to engage with all stakeholders and be open to policy recommendations from different organisations. To truly fulfil its developmental promises, the government must ensure quality public spending in these areas. Without that, our development will remain incomplete and unequal.

How to make development inclusive



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE Centre for Policy Dialogue's (CPD) recent seminar on February 10 brought together policymakers, both present and past, development practitioners and educationists and the focus of the

talk was how to achieve inclusive growth. Development itself is a multi-dimensional process and hence we cannot look at it simply from an economic point of view. Rather, there are various dimensions involved including economic, political, institutional and social.

When we look at the ruling party's electoral manifesto, it brought forth its achievements during the preceding two terms. The manifesto also made many pledges that would be fulfilled over the coming years. On the economic front, the government must deliver on its economic pledges but to do that, it will have to consolidate on its past achievements and take actions to address "the emerging challenges with specific

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work plans." When we look at economic growth, the country has achieved sustained progress over the last decade with GDP growing at more than 6 percent since 2011 and in 2018, that growth reached 7.86 percent. Looking at it from another perspective, the share of population below the national poverty line shrunk from 48.9 percent in 2000 to 24.3 percent in 2015. That means under the 6th Five Year Plan (2011-2015), the



country joined the lower-middle-income country (LMIC) category and met the LDC graduation criteria in 2018. Indeed, we actually crossed the LMIC inclusion threshold of USD 1,046 in 2015, six years earlier than envisaged.

Now to address some of the key challenges facing the government to make this growth trickle down to the masses, i.e. making growth "inclusive" so that not only does business prosper, but share some of that wealth with a larger part of the population. Two areas remain major headaches for policymakers. The first is that despite the higher GDP, the country is not generating adequate employment and hence the benefits of growth remains unequally distributed.

What we get from the presentations made is that the rich-poor divide is increasing while desired increase in the job market remains elusive. From 1991-92 fiscal to 2015-16 fiscal, i.e. a period of 15 years, the richest top 5 percent of the population's income increased 121 times. The issue of youth unemployment is a major worry. According to World Bank's 2013 data, 2.1 million people were expected to enter the labour force, while the latest 2018 data from our own Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) depicts that between 2015-16, nearly 1,296,000 million jobs were created. That means that while about 1.3 million jobs were created every year, about 800,000 newly unemployed people will

join the already unemployed in the country every year (provided all other factors remain constant).

The second problem is that the share of income held by the richest 5 percent of households in Bangladesh increased from 18.85 percent in 1991-92 to 27.89 percent in 2015-16. Conversely, the share of income held by the poorest 5 percent of households fell from 1.03 percent in 1991-92 to 0.23 percent over the same 15-year period. Unfortunately, the rich-poor divide leaped in 2015 when the richest 5 percent was 121 times richer than the poorest 5 percent. Addressing the rich-poor divide is a long-term affair and so for the purposes of this article, I am focusing more on the issue of unemployment.

Youth unemployment is a key issue and if we look at the pledges made in the run up to the last national elections, we find that Awami League talks about a youth plan that will take the internet to the youth in this country. Yes, internet is a key component for education, but we also need to increase the youth's access to computers in the education system and that too from an early stage. There has been talk about youth training centres at every upazila. While that is a good idea, it would make sense to incorporate technical and vocational training at upazila level so that skills can be developed nationwide. There is also the plan to allocate higher allocations to

the education sector and we need to recognise that merely increasing budgetary commitments to education as a whole will not bring us the result we seek, that is, in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy; we have to improve the education system where students are able to build their analytical competence.

Getting to that point will not be easy but it is not impossible. Planning for education for various subjects needs to be aligned with national plans. There is a need to draw the right people into the teaching profession by making it attractive monetarily—only good teachers can produce good students. At the end of the day, there are no shortcuts to tackling the unemployment issue, especially when we are talking about educated unemployment. The old belief that getting a higher education will automatically put someone ahead in the race to getting a job is flawed. We need to rethink our prospects (as job seekers) and it is not just about having the right degree, but also having the skills that is in demand by industry, by business and the private sector in general. Quality education and needs based vocational training can make the difference between having a job and not having one in a scenario where supply of prospective job seekers far outweigh demand.

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When the network is as slow as the traffic



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

GOING from a meeting in Gulshan to another in Motijheel one day earlier this month, I spent nearly two hours on the road which is quite common these days in Dhaka's traffic. Most of us try to utilise such horrendous commute hours by trying to make up on unfinished reading lists but in the din and bustle of Dhaka's

traffic that's a real challenge.

Another way is to catch a few z's, but as anyone knows taking a nap is much easier in moving traffic and not in the halting kind we have here. That leaves pretty much the only other thing we can do while we are cooped up in jaunts from one end of the city to another—dial up all missed calls or simply catch up

Such "dropped calls" has become so routine that an irritated Telecoms Ministry boss once called out the global CEO of a major local mobile phone operator at an international conference challenging him to fix this nuisance.

However, dropped calls are merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to quality of service (QoS) which is usually benchmarked against Service Level Agreements (SLAs) on a number of performance metrics such as network availability, call success rate, incidence of call drops, etc. In the absence of any published SLAs for the network operators it is very difficult to hold their feet to the fire so to speak. The situation has become so unbearable that epithets such as "4G is for Gorur Gari Gathae Gorai" do not seem very unkind.

These days it is quite common to see the message "call failed" when calling a valid number and after

Telephony is supposed to provide communication contacts instantly without any perceptible delay while the Internet is supposedly a store-and-forward mechanism that may appear real-time in many applications today due to the extraordinary speed of data transmissions these days, a.k.a.



with friends, relatives and clients. And with more than 150 million phones in circulation flaunting the fastest and the latest 4G networks across the nation that should be a snap whether one uses the conventional cellular phone lines or IP telephony apps like WhatsApp or Viber.

Well, that's the theory—reality is much starker as usual. During the roughly one hour of talk time on this particular trip my calls dropped more than a dozen times, sometimes as frequently as within a minute.

several attempts the call goes through only to be interrupted by dropping the call midway. This has become such an irritant that people are forced to send text messages (SMS) and in that case also you are never sure if the message goes through in real time.

Telephony is supposed to provide communication contacts instantly without any perceptible delay while the Internet is supposedly a store-and-forward mechanism that may appear real-time in many applications today due to the extraordinary speed of

data transmissions these days, a.k.a. 4G. While we boast of the latest and fastest, the existential reality of common citizens is anything but fast and instantaneous. In fact in many ways I wish our phones worked like they did 30 years ago when you picked up a phone and there was a dial tone and any number you called either rang or gave the busy signal—there was no uncertainty in the outcome.

Now with all these super high-tech telecom infrastructures we can't even be sure if we can connect to another number in a predictable way. The same goes for mobile internet. The operators claim its 4G but the network status continuously switches back and forth between E for Edge (2G), 3G and 4G making internet service highly spotty and unreliable on the road. As the burgeoning urban dwellers of the country spend more and more time on the road—whether they like it or not—the ethereal connections to the real world through our mobile phones could be a life-saver only if the mobile networks quality of service was up to standard. The telecom regulator BTRC should be given a wide berth when dealing with such inconsistent quality of mobile services.

I recall the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) several years ago took up this issue with BTRC on behalf of millions of suffering subscribers but nothing much has come of it. We can only hope that the same telecom ministry boss will bear down on the incorrigible operators to take necessary measures to improve our mobile experience befitting our elevated status as a fast-growing middle-income country or they should be made to pay stiff penalties—either way a day of reckoning for the intransigent mobile operators is long overdue.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Do we really care for the environment?

Bangladesh is one of the largest deltas in the world. Due to its geographical location the country is highly vulnerable to natural disasters and global warming has only complicated the situation.

The gradual increase in the temperature of the earth has led to rising sea level. This rising effect poses a severe threat to Bangladesh's existence. It may also cause higher temperatures, unpredictable precipitation and more extreme weather events in the coming decades. These possibly calamitous events can have dire consequences for our country. Bangladesh needs to prepare itself, consider long-term adaptation programmes and sustainable development practices in order to adjust to the changing climate.

Unfortunately, the pace at which the government has progressed in terms of adjusting to climate change is very slow. In fact, large projects that the government or its agencies have already undertaken may have adverse effects on the environment.

As a country whose existence may be endangered, at least to some extent, due to climate change, we should take special care of the environment. As such, we should implement policies and practices that are helpful to the environment, not the other way around.

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