

Is 100 percent pure water too much to ask for?

WASA must ensure safe water for all

IT seems that the WASA managing director has revised his estimate of the quality of pure water it supplies to its consumers in the capital. He now admits that not 100 percent but only 84 percent of the water is clean. And the devil is in the faulty distribution system, according to him. We believe that the percentage of people not getting potable water is actually far more than what WASA would have us believe.

That's what begs the question: is it not WASA's remit to ensure that the distribution system is secure and safe? And when it comes to drinking water, that is all the more necessary to guarantee. It is rather strange that all the recent studies regarding the water supply in the capital stem from a High Court directive when it should have been the WASA who should have been doing the study on its own without being prompted. Oversight and management are a constant exercise.

It is ironic that on the one hand, we take pride in pulling off a major feat such as putting our own satellite in space, while on the other, Dhaka WASA cannot even ensure the supply of pure drinking water to all the dwellers in the capital. When so much is spent to purify water at source, can WASA afford faulty pipelines to render that effort meaningless? Supply is as important as production. Poor quality of drinking water has short- and long-term consequences for the economy as well as for the health of the customers. Much more should be done by WASA of its own volition to ensure safe water. It all boils down to prioritising budgetary allocation and proper use of the money.

Crack down on extortionists

Businessmen targeted over phone

TRADERS living in Kachukhet area are facing the menace of getting phone calls from criminals who apparently operate with impunity. Businessmen are called up using SIM cards that are fake or internet-based applications that cannot be traced. The failure to pay is resulting in murder, and often victims are simply too traumatised to lodge a complaint with the police fearing reprisal attacks. Some have survived attacks whilst others have not been so fortunate. Extortion money is demanded in the name of well-known criminals living abroad but there are also fraudulent callers. But as people have little faith that they will get reprieve from this menace, many simply pay up.

This phenomenon is hardly new, but what it does tell us is that law enforcement agencies are suffering from a trust deficit since there is under-reporting of the extortion menace. We are told that illegal Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) is being used to call targets and the failure of the police to trace the source of these calls is not helping matters.

This sort of criminal activity has been going on for years and yet law enforcers' lack of capacity to identify callers and their location remains unaddressed. It is time for the authorities to find out the causes of this lacuna, whether it is a lack of technical resources or whether there are corrupt officials who are involved in this racket. Whatever may be the case, it is a serious threat to law and order and the law enforcement agencies need to crack down on criminals and frauds who are terrorising people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Saving environment is saving life

We have this strange mentality that drives us to destroy things first and then scramble to rebuild them. This applies to almost everything of worth ranging from towns and cities built over centuries to precious natural resources like rivers and forests. When it comes to nature, we have a habit of thinking that we can get away with causing harm to it. But as they say, "every action has an equal and opposite reaction."

Look at what is happening in various parts of the world. Water bodies including lakes, rivers and oceans are being polluted. Raw sewage and industrial waste are being indiscriminately dumped into them. Forests are being decimated to make way for industrial growth. The question is, where will all this take us? One only needs to look at what is already happening as a result of our mindless actions to understand what bleak future awaits us. Unless we start taking care of our planet and the natural world, the damage will be irreversible and there will be no turning away from total annihilation. The increasing number of cyclones and other extreme weather events around the world is a reminder that we don't have much time left. We must act fast.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

Our incomprehensible obsession with GDP

GDP does not tell us anything about rising inequalities or quality of life



FAHMIDA KHATUN

MACRO MIRROR

OUR obsession with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) seems to be growing every day while economists keep questioning its source, method, authenticity, etc. There is no doubt that Bangladesh's economy has been doing far better than before. But this is not new. Every decade has given us one additional percentage of GDP growth in Bangladesh. For an economy which starts from a low level of growth but is making efforts to move forward, its growth rate will be higher than economies which have already crossed that trajectory and become advanced countries. Thus comparing our GDP growth with those countries is flawed.

While Bangladesh may exceed some of the advanced economies in terms of its GDP growth rate and size, it may still be behind in terms of addressing inequality and ensuring distributive justice. As it stands now, the top five percent of the population possess about 29 percent of national income while the bottom five percent account for only 0.23 percent of the national income. The pace of poverty reduction is slowing while the speed of the growth of the ultra-rich population is increasing. Inequality in consumption and asset ownership is also on the rise. Thus the distributional aspect is totally absent in the GDP concept.

The limitations of GDP are rooted in the way it is calculated. GDP refers to the goods and services produced in a country in a given year. That is all. It does not say anything more than that. It cannot say whether the quality of life has improved or not, whether everyone has received the benefit of that growth or not, whether it has reduced inequality or not, whether the growth is sustainable or not, and so on. Since GDP is the market value of goods and services, whatever is transacted in the market in exchange for money contributes to GDP. Herein lies the danger. The GDP calculation method does not care about the source of such contributions.

One of my favourite examples is the issue of environmental degradation. The intrinsic value of the environment is not taken into consideration as it does not have a market price. Infrastructural or

industrial development may happen by wiping out forests and trees. Construction activities or industrial products will increase GDP. If those trees are sold in the market, even that would add to GDP. But what is the real cost of such development? If one takes into account the cost of environmental degradation and natural resource depletion, the sustainable growth rate or "green" GDP would be much less than the estimated growth rate.

GDP also does not take into account the unpaid household activities performed by women. When my

on physical infrastructure, while social infrastructure is being ignored. There is low investment in public education, and barely any monitoring of the quality of the mushrooming roadside private educational institutions that provide certificates but cannot convert certificate-holders into useful human capital. Thus their employability is low despite a crying demand for skilled human resources.

With an allocation of two percent of GDP towards education, one does not expect better. Healthcare receives even less than one percent of GDP. Hence the poor

an alarming piece of news flashes on the screen. Bank defaulters have been rewarded with a spectacular rescheduling facility. They can delay their loan repayment by paying only two percent down payment rather than the existing 10-15 percent. They will have to pay only a maximum of nine percent interest on their rescheduled loans, but the existing rate is 12-16 percent. Their repayment tenure is 10 years with a grace period of one year. Burdened with soaring loan defaults, the banking sector is now



Dhaka's air quality is consistently ranked as one of the worst in the world. The value of the environment is not taken into consideration when calculating GDP as it does not have a market price.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

mother used to cook for us, she did not contribute to GDP even though without her care and domestic work, we could not have studied or worked outside and contributed to the economy. But had she sold the food she prepared, she would have added to economic growth! GDP is all about spending money in the economy. Thus when my father retired and was left with pension only, his contribution to GDP immediately fell.

This obsession with GDP overlooks the core problems of the economy. Private investment is stuck at around 23 percent of GDP—inadequate for maintaining such a growth momentum and for creating enough jobs for the youth. Public investment is increasing mainly

facilities in public hospitals and clinics, particularly outside the capital, depriving larger communities of quality healthcare. People spend almost 72 percent of their total health costs out of their own pockets. Out-of-pocket expenditure on health is highest in Bangladesh compared to other South Asian countries. Rule of law, social justice, safety and security are everyday concerns. While we boast about achieving many gender-related targets, violence against women and girls has become endemic. Numerous such incidents go unnoticed as they are not reported. Perpetrators get away with such heinous crimes by resorting to political power.

As I sign off writing this column,

taking a U-turn instead of solving the problems once and for all. This will only encourage willful defaulters. It risks putting pressure on the liquidity situation and net profit of banks. Such facilities may provide temporary breathing space for the defaulters, but this will have a negative impact on the banking sector.

So, what type of growth are we talking about? Because GDP growth is only a hazy number that does not address the fundamental aspects of economic development. This highly politicised number does not say much about the quality of life of all citizens.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Precious childhood lost in the streets



IQRA L. QAMARI

DHAKA, a city of cacophony that reverberates from its belligerent streets which carry the clash of a million stories every day. Amidst cars honking, buses screeching, people cursing, vendors trading, the shuffling sound of pedestrians and the din of everyday life, the sound of a boy, begging for a few takas with his hand outstretched, gets muffled.

Under the scorching heat of the sun, Shakil, a skinny boy of seven with a toothless smile, runs to different cars as

increasing in number every day, should still be perpetually marginalised. A section of the population which has gone unjustifiably unrecorded in the national survey. There is no exhaustive and definitive national consensus on these floating children. As per the statistics of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), it was estimated that there are about 1.5 million street children who are vulnerable to street gangsters who lure/force them into crime, begging or prostitution. But that's all they are: estimations. Their lives operate with latent inertia, only manifesting itself like an "exhibition on abject penury" in front of our spectating eyes in broad daylight. As night creeps in, they disappear, resorting to sidewalks, park benches, bus depots,

to meet the bare minimum level of subsistence. Most of these local economic refugees come to Dhaka—wide-eyed, dreaming of living a life that would treat them better. Instead, they become the narrator of harrowing tales once their high-flying dreams make a crash landing. Some of these stories are about separation from parents, with many children being deliberately abandoned in the crowd by their guardians. Such cruel acts for one less mouth to feed.

These street children become the victims of physical harassment at the hands of law enforcers and are used as bait by the street mafioso. They are made to earn through begging, scavenging and peddling drugs with most of their earnings being confiscated by the rent-

to extract a few takas. We bear witness to emaciated boys additively sniffing glue on the sidewalks to ward off the vicious pangs of hunger. We come across little girls in rags selling napkins instead of gleefully walking to schools clad in uniforms. All of this and more collectively leaves us with a cliffhanger that fails to arouse anything more than a fleeting look.

Numerous NGOs and private organisations have mushroomed throughout the country, with a focus on catering to the needs of these children. Despite the work being done by these entities and words of assurance from the government, only the surface of this dire situation has been scratched, because only a minuscule percentage can be targeted given the slow progress of these correctors.

According to Mithun Das Kabbo, CEO of an informal school for street children, Alokito Shishu, merely teaching them ABCs is not going to fix the problem. These children are not being raised in an all-encompassing nurturing home. Growing up, these children are subjected to varying degrees of trauma. They grow up to develop an expansive set of survival skills and become more business-oriented. They would rather be out on the streets making money, satisfied in their domain, than be in school.

Unless an ambitious project powered by both the government and private agents is undertaken soon enough, these little warriors will soon be lost to extensive criminal networks. These children are in urgent need of rehabilitation so that they can finally find a place they can call home and feel safe. According to the provisions of our very constitution, children are entitled to proper healthcare, education, shelter and nutrition. The ministries of women and children affairs and social welfare can take the first step by developing a national survey centric to their numbers and conditions.

Despite our strong belief in the notion of children being the leaders of tomorrow, our negligence towards these suffering street children only goes to show our hypocrisy. So, while we fail them every day, let us remember to not add to their daily dose of misery by treating them as some sort of nuisance. After all, it is our collective responsibility to make sure their fingers are busy running through lines of books, not tapping on car windows.

Iqra L. Qamari is a student of North South University. Email: iqra.kashmir53@gmail.com



Our ambitious plans about the country's future contradict the everyday sight of children on the streets who live in dangerously harsh conditions.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

the signal turns red. Tapping furiously on the windows, he channels all his pent up anger his little heart can harbour towards the privileged sitting inside the bubble of their bourgeois life. Three frustrated taps on the windows. His regularly practised tenuous pleading and his animated face fail him as a salesperson of flowers. He moves on to the next car.

There is no answer as to why he has to suffer in wretched poverty while the rich live unscathed and nonchalant.

With Bangladesh ambitiously progressing keeping Vision 2021 in mind, it is ironic that these children, who are

stations and all sorts of platforms under the open sky, while we return to our concrete homes, the bricks of which do not even allow lingering contemplations of children in the streets, let alone their very corporeal existence.

These children neither exist in any statistical records nor do they have any proper address; they wander rootless between streets where villainous entities lurk in every corner ready to pounce on them.

Their stories begin quite ordinarily, but all too soon their whole trajectory changes, with their families unable

seekers. They are susceptible to all sorts of diseases and traumatising experiences with no access to schooling, proper nutrition or healthcare. The nightmares do not stop there. Children, too young to even comprehend the concept of sex, are sexually abused, with the majority being young girls in this case. Many become sex workers initially against their will, and later diminish to a form that simply succumbs to this system run by bloodthirsty syndicates.

While going on about our lives, we see women carrying malnourished toddlers, wearing them as badges of deprivation