

ACC reports on systemic graft in Wasa

Time to take action against corrupt officials

A report was submitted to the LGRD ministry on July 18 by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and we understand that the ACC has found systemic corruption taking place in eight projects undertaken by Dhaka Wasa. The anti-graft watchdog body has made a 12-point recommendation to prevent graft. What the report unveils is that Dhaka Wasa failed to carry out work as per project design and specifications leading to a waste of financial resources. This explains the continued water logging problem in the city and the failure of city residents to get clean drinking water.

The probe into Wasa's various projects paints a dismal picture in which project deadlines were extended for no reason, and contractors were paid in full against partially completed work, etc. Indeed, the report goes into minute details of a system which benefitted both corrupt officials and contractors alike at the detriment of Dhaka residents and the national exchequer. How on earth could a department entrusted with something as crucial as water supply and sanitation, for a city of more than 15 million residents, partake in graft year after year without any government oversight? This is a massive failure of governance.

As we stand in mid-2019, none of the eight projects have been completed, and as the report outlines, one particular project—the Sayedabad Water Treatment (Phase 3) project worth Tk 4,597 crore, which was adopted in 2015 and is due for completion a year from now—has made no significant progress. We agree with the ACC's assessment that joint monitoring teams should be set up to check graft, oversee the tendering process and tighten controls over adoption of projects that will have the proper financial checks-and-balances. At the end of the day, there is no alternative to proper oversight if we wish to check corruption that seems to have engulfed this department. Whether the authorities will adopt ACC's recommendations is, of course, another matter altogether.

HC stricture on dengue menace

The DCCs must take the matter more seriously

THE High Court (HC) observed on July 17 that the two city corporations have failed to tackle the outbreak of dengue infestation and that it has already cost the lives of more than 20 people. During the hearing of a writ petition by a rights organisation, the HC stated that the city corporations are run with taxpayers' money and it is necessary to scrutinise where the Tk 20-22 crore allocated for this purpose is being used, because it is obviously not being spent to contain the Aedes mosquito population.

We know that the number of recorded dengue fever cases in May and June of this year was more than five times that of the corresponding months of last year. A report in this paper in early July quoted the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) saying that while a mere 347 people had been infected with dengue in the two months last year, some 1,864 got infected during this May-June period. And while a particular city mayor may opine that the medicines being applied now are slightly less effective and that new tenders have been floated to bring in more potent medication, the question is, precisely what are the people of this city to do during the six months it will take for the new shipment of sprays to come in?

The DGHS has stated that dengue fever in Bangladesh is now an endemic disease. That means the dengue mosquito will remain active throughout the year. That being the case, is it not time for the authorities to start treating the fight against Aedes mosquito as a priority health issue? People are dying and we need more than words to keep our loved ones safe from this fatal disease. Hopefully, the cries of loved ones who have had the misfortune of losing someone close will reach the ears of those who have been entrusted with keeping the public safe from such a potent outbreak of the dengue fever.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop cattle fattening

It is a common scenario in the country's cattle market during Eid ul Azha that unscrupulous traders inject banned steroid hormone into animals, especially cows, to fatten them. Cows become fat within a short period for the absurd amount of steroid hormone used on them, damaging their vital organs.

Consumers are most at risk because of this illegal activity. If the meat of such infected animals is taken, for example, one's liver can get enlarged. The most awful changes may take place among children and women. Children are likely to gain weight and suffer from many diseases both in the short term and long. With this year's Eid ul Azha approaching fast, the government should take measures to stop this practice, given the health risks it poses, and allow in the cattle market only animals safe for human consumption through proper inspection at the entry points.

Md Zillur Rahaman, by Email

Case for a critical review of our education

We must sow good to be able to reap good



FIRDOUSI NAHER

THIS write-up comes on the heels of a recently-concluded international conference hosted by the Bureau of Economic Research and the Department of Economics, University of

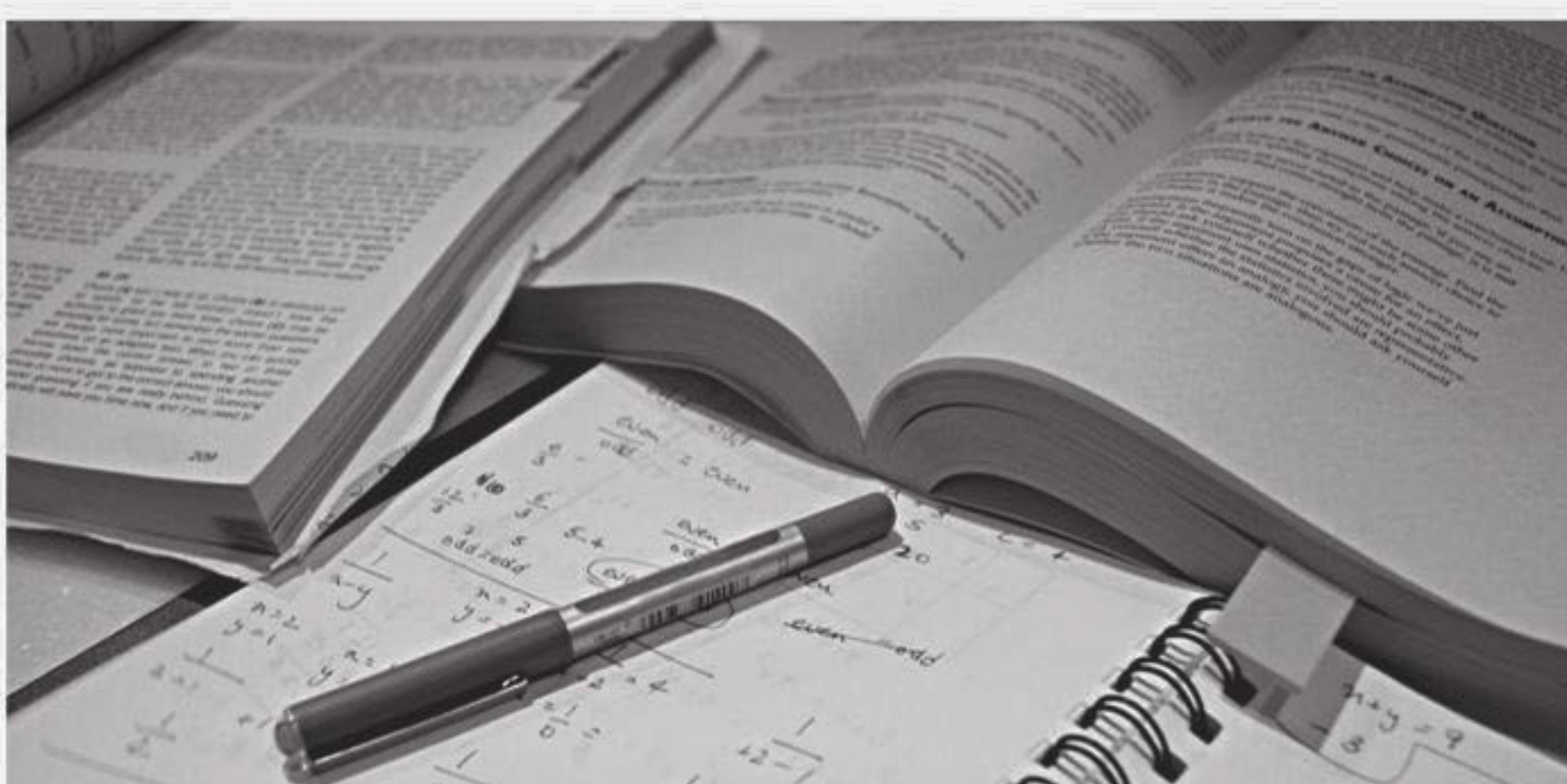
Dhaka. Amongst the many issues that were discussed on the pathways to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development, it was the education factor that surfaced repeatedly. What kind of an education system does Bangladesh have and is it inclusive? What is the quality of our education and how much does it contribute to human development?

That education is a fundamental right of every citizen has long been recognised and it has been the topmost priority of the government to ensure education for all. Indeed, one has to commend the leaps that have been made on this front, particularly the gender parity that has been achieved with regard to enrolment at the primary and lower secondary levels. The development of a network of non-formal primary education providers to help raise literacy of adults, who are bypassed by the formal system, has ensured that education is accessible to all groups in the population.

The remarkable developments are, however, overshadowed by a skewed education system that has come into practice in Bangladesh. The heterogeneity in the curricula of the three broad streams—Bangla medium, English medium and religious education—carries the vestiges of an elitist and colonial one. A handful of English-medium schools that primarily follow variants of the British curricula cater to the *crème de la crème* in the society. Bangla-medium schools, which educate a large section of the student population, follow the syllabus prescribed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). There is an "English version" as well to the NCTB curriculum, targeted for those interested in the national curriculum and prefer English as the medium of instruction. A huge number of students attend madrasas, or religious schools,

which have a focus on Islamic teachings and customs.

Intrinsic to such a diverse education system is the breeding of disparities—disparities not only in knowledge and training but also in thinking, attitudes, behaviour and values. These inequities understandably lead to discontentment in society which can potentially magnify over time and eventually lead to many social ills including crime and violence. Needless to mention, in recent years, we have seen a sudden rise in crimes in the country which poses a huge threat to the international reputation that we have earned—of being a country experiencing robust economic growth with immense potential and highly resilient people.



The foundations of human capital are laid in early childhood through basic schooling and lasting learnings.

SOURCE: EN-LAW.TAU.AC.II

Our biggest asset is our demographic dividend. We need to reap the potential of this dividend to multiply and sustain the developments that have been made so far. Education is the key to that. But the skewed education system that we are currently following will only put us on a regressive path, undoing much of the good work that has already been done. Bangladesh aspires to be a developing country by 2021. Towards that end, it is important that we make ourselves and our achievements noticed amongst the global community to not only make an impression but also to realise some of our needs and aspirations. Sadly, we lack that critical attribute to effective expression. Our soft skills are still at a basic stage and

highly inadequate. We are missing out on many opportunities in today's globalised world for our failure to build upon these skills.

The mushrooming of out-of-school coaching centres is a stark manifestation of the sub-standard teaching quality, which includes even the so-called English-medium schools. It is every parent's desire to provide the best possible education for the child. With increasing incomes and affordability, the demand for English-medium schools has gone up, setting off a thriving business. Inherent in this is the notion that English-medium schools are "superior" to the other streams that are prevalent. While this is true for a few well-established and reputed ones that strive

to impart quality education, for most others, it is not so. Good quality teachers, teaching materials and techniques evade most schools.

The weak educational foundation determines the quality of those who are fortunate enough to continue beyond the primary level to secondary and upper levels. They are the ones who graduate and move on to a different capacity of imparting education, thus completing the vicious circle. It is a case of "as you sow, so shall you reap". The massive burden on the government of subsidising higher education is self-defeating. The focus on conventional higher education with inadequate attention to technical and vocational education combine to widen

the skills gap. The traditional notion of the necessity of a "degree" still dominates the society and we strive to attain that, whatever may be the quality. If things move the way they are moving in this sector, we will simply be perpetuating the inequities. There is a huge demand for quality in the labour force which we are not able to meet. We have to be able to break the vicious cycle and ensure that we sow good to be able to reap good.

The fruits of a good education system are known to all. But how can we achieve that? The pathways have already been identified in the extensive research work that has been done on this, by both national experts as well as through the commissioning of international expertise. However, an effective implementation of the recommendations that have been made in these studies remains elusive. The ball is now in our court. We need massive reforms in the education sector. A beginning can be made with a curriculum that promotes equality in society and is in tune with "Digital Bangladesh". While one is cognisant of the initial problems that are bound to occur with changes in the curriculum, we will have to tackle these head-on, sooner or later. In the short and medium terms, a simultaneous investment in quality teachers needs to take place, which promises to break the vicious circle and eventually transform the system into a self-sustaining and progressive one. This calls for sufficient resources to be dedicated to this sector for an overhauling of the education system, both in terms of delivery and management. Once we are able to achieve this, the multiplier effects of investing in human capital will ensue.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is ushering in a change in the nature of work. To reap the benefits of the revolution and at the same time prepare for the challenges posed by it, investment in human capital is the need of the hour. The foundations of human capital are laid in early childhood through basic schooling and lasting learnings. In the transition to becoming a middle-income country, Bangladesh must be able to equip its workforce accordingly. Education is the backbone of a nation—it can make or break it.

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Haphazardly planting trees won't help tackle climate change

When it comes to climate change, reducing consumption is more important than planting trees



SNEHA PANDEY

that because trees take in carbon dioxide during photosynthesis, planting them would naturally sequester carbon and help fight climate change. But recent research shows that this understanding may be an oversimplification of how trees interact with the atmosphere.

A 2014 study, for example, found that volatile gases emitted by trees actually contribute to the warming of the planet. When mixed with airborne pollutants from vehicles and industries, these compounds give rise to ozone and methane—powerful greenhouse gases that trap heat in the atmosphere.

On top of this, dark green forest canopies absorb more heat than do fields, the bare ground or snow. This absorption may be more or less exaggerated depending on the species of the tree (and the colour of their leaves). This means that when it comes to planting forests, location and tree species matter. A lot. In the tropics, for example, where trees grow relatively fast and transpire significant amounts of water that eventually form clouds, forests help with cooling. Meanwhile, in temperate areas, where forests grow more slowly and cover up snowfields, the effect can be the exact opposite.

A study found that European forests, more than 85 percent of which are currently managed by humans, had, over the course of two-and-a-half centuries, actually contributed to increased warming instead of decreasing it. The researchers attributed this trend to the replacement of natural lighter-canopied broadleaved forests with plantations of darker-canopied coniferous species that tended to absorb more heat.

In addition to determining that sequestration capacity is, in fact, affected by tree species, this study also demonstrates that carbon sequestration is more efficient in natural forests than in those managed

by humans. Scientists have determined that naturally standing forests are six times more effective than agroforests and forty times more efficient than plantations at storing carbon. This is because, among other reasons, harvested trees release massive amounts of stored carbon into the atmosphere. Yet, almost half of the areas pledged by countries for the 2011 global effort to restore 150 million hectares of forests, are monoculture plantations—a move that, while highly symbolic, is unlikely to significantly alter carbon concentration in the atmosphere.

Diversified portfolio required
Planting trees is beneficial for humans and the planet in a number of ways—



PHOTO: REUTERS

from biodiversity protection to filtration of air and water. My objective in writing this article is not to bring into question the value of planting trees but to rather answer the question: How far can we expect forests to take us in our fight against climate change, especially when there are no clear global guidelines regarding their management?

Emerging research shows that for mitigation outcomes, forest management has to be context-specific. Unfortunately, we have no clear indication of how billions of dollars' worth of forest carbon management programmes like Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) are faring when we

take into account these recent findings. Additionally, a recent meta-analysis of various REDD+ projects shows that the carbon outcomes of these schemes have also not been well accounted for. Simply put, we have no clear indication of how far forests have bought us in our fight against climate change.

Scrapping carbon management programmes like REDD+ entirely is not the answer because, when well-executed, these programmes have the potential to generate social, biodiversity and climate mitigation benefits. A better strategy would be to become more cognisant of new developments in the field and adopt a continuously adapting management strategy. But this is easier said than done,

and it might take years before these programmes start generating the mitigation outcomes we want. Not putting all our eggs in one (carbon sequestration) basket, and diversifying our climate change mitigation portfolio is crucial. Too much focus on building systems that absorb carbon emissions, experts worry, could distract policymakers from making efforts to actually reduce the emissions in the first place. In addition to carbon sequestration, current mainstream mitigation strategies focus mostly on adopting renewable energies and sustainable modes of transportation—i.e. technocratic solutions that are more inclined towards reducing

the impact of consumption, rather than reducing consumption itself.

The insatiable consumer
Climate change, at its core, is a problem created by excessive consumerism. A 2015 study finds that household consumption is responsible for three-fifths of global emissions today. Not surprisingly, the study also finds that consumerism rises with income and that richer populations show a much higher rate of such behaviour than poorer ones. For example, researchers calculated that the per capita consumption of an average American citizen is ten times that of an average Chinese. It is reported that countries that have the highest rates of per capita consumption—i.e. the United States, Luxembourg, Australia, etc.—have 5.5 times more environmental impact than the world average. (It is also worth noting that 80 percent of these impacts occur within the supply chains of the products and go largely unnoticed by an average consumer, effectively meaning that our environmental footprints are often much bigger than we realise.)

While it is impossible to reduce household emissions in their entirety, it can be lowered significantly if richer populations were to change their relationship with the goods that they consume. When people mindlessly indulge in fast food, fast fashion and new electronic fads, they incentivise brands and companies to produce low-grade products and services that often have high environmental impacts.

Markets respond to demand and unless consumers demand environmentally (and socially) conscientious products, this tide will not turn. Even if we were to assume that there was enough political will and funding to plant carbon-sequestering trees in all viable land worldwide, we would be able to sequester less than a third of the 620 (and steadily rising) gigatonnes of carbon emissions. This is simply not enough to avert the punishing effects of climate change. The only way to sustainably mitigate for climate change is to put a check on our consumption and environmental footprint. Sequestering carbon emissions in trees is, at best, a stopgap measure.

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