

City corporations taking over Dhaka's drainage management

A positive development for solving the city's waterlogging problem

THE two city corporations of Dhaka have finally taken over the management and maintenance responsibilities of 26 canals and 10 kilometres of box culverts from Dhaka Wasa. These canals and box culverts along with 385km of storm water drainage had been under Wasa's jurisdiction since 1988. However, Wasa had failed miserably to maintain these water bodies and reclaim the canals that have been grabbed by powerful quarters. As the city's waterlogging problem became acute during the past few years, the two city corporations had expressed their wish to take over the responsibility, claiming that they could solve these long-standing problems.

While we appreciate their taking over of the charge of drainage management, we would also like to remind them that reclaiming the city's canals from the clutches of the encroachers and cleaning them up are indeed a difficult job, for which they will need to work in coordination with other agencies concerned. Since most of the water bodies and canals of the city have been grabbed by politically powerful quarters, and some of them have even been occupied by the government itself, the city corporations will not be able to reclaim those without the help of the government agencies and local lawmakers concerned. Therefore, they will need to work in coordination with Wasa, Rajuk, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the deputy commissioner's office who also have a role in managing the drainage of the city. The city corporations have to remember that it was not only Wasa that was at fault for Dhaka's waterlogging problem, rather, it was a collective failure of all the agencies concerned.

Having said that, we appreciate the commitment expressed by our mayors to rid the city of its long-standing waterlogging problem. They have pledged to turn the city into a modern one by reclaiming its water bodies and connecting the canals with each other. They have also pledged to arrange a water transport system and create more water retention areas. All these ideas are surely implementable, but for that they will need an integrated master plan. Reclaiming Dhaka's water bodies and cleaning up the canals have been a long-time demand of its residents. We expect the city corporations to start working to that end without wasting any time. It will eventually improve the city's overall environment as well.

Pangsha municipality grappling with waste management

Authorities must wake up from their slumber to reduce public sufferings

A recent report published in this daily reveals how the authorities of Pangsha municipality in Rajbari have been dumping garbage from the town onto a spot right beside the Rajbari-Kushtia highway, displaying total disregard for human health and the environment. Established in 1990, Pangsha municipality is yet to introduce a waste management system for the town. As a result, waste from households, businesses as well as hospitals and clinics in the area are being thrown out in the open—a major threat to public health as the waste contains toxic chemicals, radioactive elements and pathological substances which are harmful for the human body.

Thirty years on since the founding of the municipality, why is it that the town still lacks a functional waste management system? Why haven't the municipality authorities taken the direly necessary steps to resolve such a horrible situation? Merely citing the lack of space cannot be an acceptable answer at any cost. As the dumping ground is located near a highway, waste continues to spill onto the road hampering traffic and making it nearly impossible to commute on. And when it rains, the garbage on the slippery road spells nothing but disaster. Residents of the area have also complained about the foul stench that is unbearable, along with the hazardous smoke that is emitted from burning of the garbage.

It is crucial to dispose of waste in protected areas in order to minimise pollution and keep the environment safe. Thus, relocation of the dumping ground is most essential. Pangsha municipality's lackadaisical failure to manage the garbage further enables the breeding ground for various insects like mosquitoes to spread other diseases. Displaying such apathy towards the environment and public health must not be tolerated. Proper waste management is even more of a necessity with the ongoing pandemic. The higher authorities must immediately direct the Pangsha municipality to comply with the rules and regulations and carry out their duties more responsibly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop deforestation immediately

Although afforestation plays an important role in reducing global warming, it is unfortunate that we're cutting down trees indiscriminately. We have learned from in-depth reports in this daily how century-old trees have been cut down illegally from our reserve forests, mainly in Bandarban. It is a matter of grave concern that this kind of activity continues unabated. The authorities must prevent deforestation in our reserve forests and elsewhere at any cost.

Hasibul Hasan, Chattogram



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. The same day, William Shakespeare, an 81-year-old namesake of the bard, became the second person to receive the vaccine outside the clinical trial. We heaved a sigh of relief, thinking, "all's well that ends well". Now the race is on to get the vaccines and get them distributed and administered. The sooner we can get the nation inoculated, the sooner we will be able to join the golden jubilee celebration.

For too long, everything has been put on hold. Meanwhile, we have pondered a lot over the normal and the new normal, reimagining the future in a post-Covid world. Many ideas are in the air. As an educator, I shall reflect on some of these ideas pertaining to the education sector that are being showered from the above. Given the randomness of these ideas, my responses are equally random.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has recently suggested that there will be a centralised admission system for all private universities. The policy makers are perhaps buoyed by the western model; they believe they can replicate what UCAS does for the UK. The Universities and Colleges Admissions

Can we not take pilot steps to open institutions with due caution? Can we not have some proper studies to identify those locations where face-to-face classes can resume in this New Year? A one-size-fits-all central decision may not be effective to combat this ever-mutating virus.



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

opened its doors for the treatment of Covid-19 patients in Wuhan, China. Just 10 days earlier, five road rollers, 33 bulldozers, 95 excavators, 160 dump trucks, 160 management personnel and 240 workers had started working on the hospital's construction site. Halfway across the world, the United States Navy's hospital ships "USNS Mercy" and "USNS Comfort"—each with a capacity of 1,000 beds—were deployed in Los Angeles and New York on March 27 and 30, respectively, to ease the pressure of Covid-19 patients on regular hospitals. These examples show how rapidly constructed infrastructure projects, as well as innovative ideas, can help fight the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 calls upon countries to "build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation". Unfortunately, the infrastructure required for successful industrialisation and innovation in Bangladesh is inadequate, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure deficiencies are acute. Glaring inequalities are present in terms of access to modern technological infrastructure such as high-speed broadband internet. Efforts to fill in the infrastructure gap with a plethora of projects have been only partly successful due to our weak implementation capacity. Cost and time overruns in fast-track mega projects have reduced the efficacy of public investment, creating fiscal pressure and impeding private investment. Although Bangladesh has a good debt servicing record, debt sustainability may become an issue in the future, especially in the case of large infrastructure projects that are being financed from foreign sources. SDG target 9.2 asserts the need to

Reimagining the future of education

Service (UCAS) is a UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities. It operates as an independent charity and runs several online application portals to process applications to higher educational institutions. I don't think the UGC is thinking of the US model where universities and colleges encourage students to apply directly to the institutions of their choice. In the American model, the admissions decisions are primarily based on a student's academic record and applicable test scores, such as TOEFL, the SAT or ACT.

Engineering and medical colleges set questions at a very advanced level as they expect their students to learn more than they have done in their high schools. In 2014, following the Dhaka University "Kha" (B) unit exam, only two applicants were found eligible to enrol for the English department. The then education minister took it personally, stating that the DU English department had deliberately done it to humiliate the system. Nothing radical has been done in the last few years to suggest that we can rely on yet another centralised public system. The UGC is probably testing the water by floating such

though the intention is noble, the news comes as a shock. In 1993, the government allowed MPO colleges to offer Honours and Master's degrees. The decision was seen as a cosmetic surgery to hide the inadequacies of our higher education system. It was a popular decision to enhance the number of graduates; the local MPs used this to boost the ego of their constituents. Too many people have got involved in this sector in the last 27 years, so to stop the process without coming up with an alternative plan of rehabilitating the teachers, students, administrative staff and support services will be suicidal. To expect that all these students will now opt for vocational training, leaving mainstream education, is equally slippery.

The educational institutions have been closed for almost ten months now, although offices of all other kinds are slowly coming to terms with the new normal. Only schools, colleges and universities are falling behind. The health ministry, on the other hand, is telling us that children under 18 will not be given vaccines in the first phase, probably because they are resilient. Even the WHO recommends opening of educational institutions in places with less than 5 percent infection rate. There are many rural areas that are less affected by this pandemic. Can we not take pilot steps to open institutions with due caution? Can we not have some proper studies to identify those locations where face-to-face classes can resume in this New Year? A one-size-fits-all central decision may not be effective to combat this ever-mutating virus.

It's heartening to see that new books are being distributed even during this pandemic. This is the greatest New Year's gifts our students can think of. The interactive e-versions of these text books are equally laudable. I am sure our policy makers have talked to various agencies before making their decisions. But from the way these pieces of news are communicated and shared, it is hard to trace the process through which these news items come to the surface. The re-opening of schools, the streamlining of admission systems, the emphasis on the quality of our graduates, and the shutdown of a non-functional higher educational system are all good initiatives. The problem arises when these issues are delivered from a top-down model that does not take the ground reality into consideration. If we are to reimagine the future, we need a stocktaking of our present moments and the people who are living them. The lived experiences of the stakeholders can help us devise a local plan for the future!

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'Unless the institutional infrastructure is in place, it will be premature to impose a central admission system for private universities.'

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Earlier, the UGC suggested a cluster admission system for public universities to ease the hassles of admission-seekers. However, going for admission clusters for the public system depending on their ranking, locality and disciplinary orientation is one thing, but to have a central admission system for a sector comprising 100-plus universities which are still in flux does not make any sense. Only a handful of these universities are functional with a semblance of higher education. Unless the institutional infrastructure is in place, it will be premature to impose a central admission system for private universities.

There are still some investigative reports done by Maasranga Television available on YouTube that show how some dodgy board officials in cohort with different colleges are responsible for grade manipulation. One can literally buy a GPA 5 for Tk 2.5 lakh. Rigorous admission tests are required because there is no credibility left for the public examination.

ideas, but abrupt comments like these expose the lack of coordination between the UGC and the education ministry.

In a recent discussion, published in the daily Jugantor on December 31, a former education advisor has pointed out that the National Education Policy of 2010 is yet to be fully implemented. The report mentions that the Education Policy did not spark any controversy because it was adopted through a participatory model where various stakeholders could give their inputs. I don't know whether the Covid-inflicted moratorium is responsible for the lack of coordination in many of the items hitting the newsstands now.

The education minister on Thursday broached a very important issue. She wants the private degree colleges to stop offering Honours and Master's degrees. There are 315 colleges under the National University that are giving such degrees. The general suspicion is that these institutions are failing to produce employable graduates. Once again, even

Covid-19 and SDG 9: Strengthening infrastructure and innovation

double industry's share in employment and gross domestic product (GDP) in the Least Developed Countries by 2030. Industrialisation in Bangladesh, as measured by the growth of share of manufacturing in GDP, had been stagnant at around 15 percent during the years 1996-2005. However, since 2006, the share of manufacturing in GDP has been growing steadily every year, with the pace of growth picking up after 2010. In 2018,

of the Bangladesh economy. Such apprehension is confirmed by the fact that the share of workers employed in the services sector increased from 24.6 percent in 1999 to 39.8 percent in 2019. Thus, Bangladesh's economy, like those of other South Asian countries, has managed to undergo a shift directly from agriculture to services.

Industry-led structural transformation can play a key role in generating

has also taken a blow since the start of the pandemic, which has led to serious repercussions throughout the economy. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimates indicate that Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) exports in April 2020 fell by 80 percent compared to April 2019, and one million RMG workers, who were largely women, were either fired or furloughed. Another study by the World Bank has shown that 19 percent of female garment workers in Bangladesh lost their jobs between March 25 and September 15 in 2020. Bangladesh's RMG export orders valued at more than USD 3 billion were cancelled due to the pandemic.

However, since the Covid-19 pandemic still remains as an evolving situation, it is difficult to ascertain how short-lived or long-lasting its shocks will be. If history is any indicator of the future, it is likely that the resilience and tenacity of the economy and people of Bangladesh will overcome the Covid-19 crisis, just like many others in the past.

A number of steps need to be taken to steer Bangladesh in its path towards recovery from Covid-19 and achievement of SDG 9. Longstanding non-operational projects should be delisted from the Annual Development Programme (ADP). The practice of providing symbolic allocation to keep inefficient projects running should be stopped. Feasibility studies that include comprehensive cost-benefit analysis should be made mandatory for all projects, and all project feasibility reports should be made publicly available. Industrial policies should be designed to encourage economic diversification in order to reduce vulnerability to shocks. The power of technology should be harnessed in order to improve productivity and increase the complexity of exports. An enabling environment needs to be created that will facilitate investment and support the placement of domestic producers into global value chains. These measures, inter alia, will be conducive towards recovering from Covid-19 and implementing SDG 9 in Bangladesh by 2030.

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File photo of a construction site of the Dhaka Metro Rail project.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

the share of manufacturing in GDP stood at 22.85 percent. Thus, the country had already achieved the milestone of having manufacturing value-added equal to at least 21.5 percent of GDP even before 2020.

Despite the sluggish pace of industrialisation, the economy of Bangladesh has still undergone significant structural change. The International Labour Organization's modelled estimates suggest that the share of workers employed in the agriculture sector decreased from 65 percent in 1999 to 39.7 percent in 2019. On the other hand, the share of workers employed in the industry sector almost doubled from 10.4 percent in 1999 to 20.5 percent in 2019. Nonetheless, there are concerns about premature de-industrialisation

employment and alleviating poverty. An industry sector that makes use of labour-intensive production technology could absorb the enormous numbers of youth entering Bangladesh's labour market every year, and ensure that the economic growth is pro-poor. Therefore, employment in the manufacturing sector is an issue that demands attention of the policymakers.

Worldwide, Covid-19 has created a huge setback for the manufacturing and transportation sectors of the economy, triggering instability in distribution chains and food supply and causing unemployment and underemployment. In the first quarter of 2020, manufacturing output fell by 6 percent globally, and by 14.1 percent in China. Manufacturing in Bangladesh