

# Hugh Brammer: Remembering an exemplary geographer



MAHRUKH MOHIUDDIN

**H**UGH Brammer was unique in many ways.

His life's mission was to study the soil, agriculture and climate of a country that was not his own, and to disseminate the knowledge he gained in the most scientific and authentic manner.

Hugh Brammer produced 11 books that are all published from Bangladesh, and the publication of a Bengali translation of his final book is underway. A bachelor all his life, he dedicated his time in advising public policymakers and NGOs with sincere commitment to his field of knowledge. Through his work and dedication, he came to be known as "the foremost authority on the soil and agro-ecology of Bangladesh".

Brammer spent 25 years studying the soil of Bangladesh as Agricultural Development Adviser and Soil Scientist at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), and he diligently strived with his evidence-based analytical work to challenge the myths and misunderstandings about Bangladesh's physical environment. These myths include the popular understanding that the annual river floods replenish the fertility of the country's soils, and, in his words—the "wild assertions and assumptions" made by academics and the media about the impact of sea-level rise on Bangladesh, the most popular being that a large part of the country might be inundated by the end of the 21st century and about 30 million people may be displaced.

Hugh spent 40 years trying to scientifically disprove these claims through the books he wrote. In the prefaces of his latest two publications, his frustrations and impatience with the lack of factual engagement of academics on the soil and climate change of Bangladesh was rather pronounced.

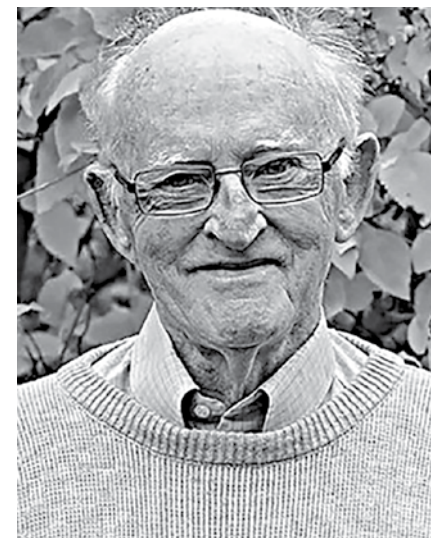
In his preface to the book *Climate Change, Sea-level Rise and Development in Bangladesh*, he wrote: "The author attended a meeting on climate change between representatives of the Bangladesh and United Kingdom

governments in London in September 2008. He was disturbed to find that speakers from both countries were speaking of ongoing climate change entirely in anecdotal terms. After the meeting, he spoke with a number of delegates from Bangladesh whom he knew, drawing their attention to the country's meteorological records and the analyses of climate data up to 1984 that had been made in the FAO Agroecological Zones Study (FAO, 1988), which the author had managed before his retirement from FAO in 1987. Analysis of the following 24 years' data, he said, would make it possible to measure actual changes since the earlier period and so enable factual evidence to be substituted for anecdotes, assumptions and convictions. Regrettably, he found no interest in taking up such a study."

actual impact of sea-level rise.

He clarified his position further into the preface: "The author is not a climate change denier. As a geographer, he is well aware of the potential for global warming to affect Bangladesh's climate and coastal areas. But he is also aware, both as a geographer and on the basis of his long experience in and with Bangladesh, that changes due to climate change and sea-level rise are progressing much more slowly than are other important factors that are affecting economic development and human welfare in Bangladesh now: rapid population growth for one; and for another, the impact on the country's growing population and expanding economy of its continuing exposure to natural disasters unrelated to climate change."

He relentlessly pursued the



Hugh Brammer (1925-2021).

Agriculture in Bangladesh in 1978; a number of significant recognitions from his country, and in 2018, his publisher, The University Press Limited (UPL), honoured him with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

In Brammer's acceptance note of UPL's Lifetime Achievement Award, he wrote: "I didn't write my books for personal gain, of course. I wrote them because I wanted to share with others... the technical information that I had been privileged to gain during my long career in the country. ...There is still much to be learnt in Bangladesh that needs to be learnt..."

The royalties from the sales of his books go to BRAC as scholarships for college education of meritorious students from poor families.

It was often a challenge to keep up with Hugh's expectations, and his unending drive in producing new manuscripts for dissemination. Even though he passed on at the mature age of 95, it still feels like a major loss because he was being just as productive with generating new knowledge, until he fell sick with pneumonia. My regret will remain that he left with a sense of unfulfillment, and a deep disappointment that he could not see his work available in Bengali during his lifetime. He mentioned in an email to me, "I am almost daily disturbed by articles by Bangladeshi authors that I read in the press or in academic journals revealing their ignorance of the geography of their own country. At 94, I'm running out of time! My urge is to get my information out in Bengali where it is more likely to be read and used."

As his publisher, our aim is to fulfil his unrealised wish before the end of 2021. Beyond being a longstanding and loyal author, Hugh has also been a guardian angel of UPL, a champion of the mission that UPL upholds—enabling a knowledge-based society. Losing Hugh was like losing a very close relative and guide, whose presence we feel every day, and will continue to feel in our journey ahead. Our deepest respect and gratitude to a selfless giant. If UPL ever builds a garden, it will be dedicated to his memory.

Mahrukh Mohiuddin is the managing director of The University Press Limited (UPL).



In a later part of the preface, he wrote how strongly he felt about the importance of drawing attention to the dynamic characteristics of the Bangladesh delta, and how its nature may influence the actual impact of sea-level rise. He attempted to raise funds for a technical study from the University of Cambridge, but found that there was more interest in policy measures, rather than in proper scientific enquiry into the physical geography of Bangladesh's coastal area that could determine the

government, donors and NGOs to reassess their priorities based on the scientifically oriented views he was presenting, but to little avail.

Hugh Brammer had the unique advantage of living in the country for almost 25 years and of measuring factual information on the country's environment. On the reconnaissance soil survey of the country (then East Pakistan) in 1961-1971, in which over 70,000 soil observations were made, he walked through almost every upazila in

the country. Those who worked with him closely would say that Brammer knew the nature of the soil of Bangladesh like the palm of his own hand. He would point to the soil of any district from an aircraft and describe its unique characteristics in great detail to his fellow travellers. He was a keen observer of how farmers adapted their crop and cultivation practices to different environments and natural disasters, and with the advent of high-yield crop varieties and other technological advancements. Even when he was unable to travel to Bangladesh, he would regularly collect Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data and climate data on Bangladesh for his work, and would read Bangladeshi newspapers everyday to stay on top of what went on in the country he loved.

The kind of seriousness with which Brammer engaged in the agro-ecology and climate is rare even in a native geographer or climate scientist today. It is a pity that Hugh received little accolade and insufficient attention, despite the vast body of knowledge he produced for our country. In October 2017, the *Prothom Alo* published a feature on him, through which his name reached a wider audience, and some more people came to know of him and his work in Bangladesh.

Hugh Brammer received the President's gold medal for services to

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Let the great transition begin

ZIA KHAN AND JOHN W McARTHUR

**W**ITH Covid-19 vaccinations underway in some countries and efforts to expand access still ongoing, world leaders will soon shift their attention from crisis response to pandemic recovery. Governments have already committed USD 12 trillion to the Covid-19 response, and there will be strong pressure to keep investing in a return to the pre-pandemic "normal." But that would be a mistake.

Putting aside budget constraints, we have just seen that the pre-pandemic normal had dire implications for the world. Our strained interactions with the environment helped introduce the coronavirus to humans, our hyperconnected global economy allowed it to spread like wildfire, and its especially deadly effects on the most vulnerable populations has highlighted the consequences of deep-seated social and economic inequalities within and between countries.

Instead of aiming to restore that pre-2020 way of life, our leaders should set their sights on creating a different, better world. Fortunately, they already have a roadmap in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which embody economic, social and environmental targets that all countries

have committed to achieve by 2030.

When originally adopted in 2015, the SDGs aimed to double down on a previous generation's progress by eradicating extreme poverty, reversing the scourge of environmental degradation, and decisively reducing inequality. By the time Covid-19 began devastating the world, targets like ending preventable child deaths were coming within sight, even if problems like climate change and social inequality were looming ever larger. And although the virus has impeded progress, it hasn't changed the essential outcomes.

Moreover, the pandemic has shone a spotlight on problems like food insecurity, gender inequity, racism and biodiversity loss, alongside longstanding gaps in access to education, jobs and life-saving technologies. These are all problems that the SDGs seek to address.

Looking ahead, the immediate challenge is to adapt to our new conditions while charting a course toward a better destination. Through our own work with 17 Rooms, a global community of experts collaborating to identify practical next steps for each SDG, we have identified four "transitions" to help guide us. Each reflects a major shift in attitudes and decision-making that requires more sustained support to match the scale of

the global issues we face.

The first such transition concerns equal justice. Developments in 2020 shed new light on longstanding social and economic inequities faced by women, minorities, low-income workers and victims of state-sponsored violence, among many other groups. Tackling the roots of inequality requires deep and persistent commitments to economic and social progress for every segment of society. This can start with everything from "last mile" alliances to solve the toughest problems of exclusion to "just recovery" campaigns to ensure that policy responses to the crisis are transparently supporting those who need help the most.

The second major shift is toward "blue-green" replenishment. For too long, natural capital (the environment) has been valued only at the margins. But the pandemic has shown that an imbalance between nature and humans in one part of the world can upend systems everywhere. The planet's "blue" skies, oceans, and natural waterways and "green" land-based ecosystems exist within absolute physical boundaries that we ignore at our peril. We must do more to protect these crucial assets at scale.

To that end, at the Convention on Biological Diversity in May, all countries must adopt the "30x30" framework,

which seeks to protect 30 percent of the world's land and sea (through permanent measures) by 2030. The world also needs to reallocate roughly USD five trillion in explicit and implicit annual fossil-fuel subsidies toward green jobs, renewable energy, and other technologies to preserve the natural assets humanity needs to survive and thrive.

The third transition is toward inclusive systems for technological innovation. In recent decades, sleek, shiny consumer electronics have typically garnered the most attention. But the crises of 2020 have underscored the need for both equitable access to technology and public trust in new solutions. From skepticism about vaccines to concerns over data privacy and low-carbon energy incentives, we now face an imperative to establish a technology infrastructure that solves immediate problems while also fostering confidence in the longer-term trajectory of innovation.

Here, welcome changes can start with everything, from coordinating epidemic sentinel (monitoring) networks across regions to piloting independent digital platforms within fast-growing emerging economies.

Finally, none of these political, economic, environmental and

technological shifts can succeed without an equally large-scale generational transition. The Covid-19 crisis hasn't just exposed the shortcomings of current leaders; it has also jeopardised the life prospects of hundreds of millions of young people.

A generational transition can start with many small-scale initiatives. For example, government ministers can set joint investment strategies with kids who have been shut out of school, and universities can deploy their newly implemented online learning systems to help communities develop new skills for local jobs.

As the world begins to recover from the deep strains of 2020, many will be tempted to pick up where everything left off before crisis hit. But doing so would miss the point. We need to match the new awareness of our global fragility with renewed support for the approaches that will make us less susceptible to crisis in the first place. We need 2021 to mark the start of a great transition.

Zia Khan is Senior Vice President for Innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation. John W. McArthur is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

## QUOTABLE Quote



LEWIS CARROLL (1832-1898) British author.

Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality.

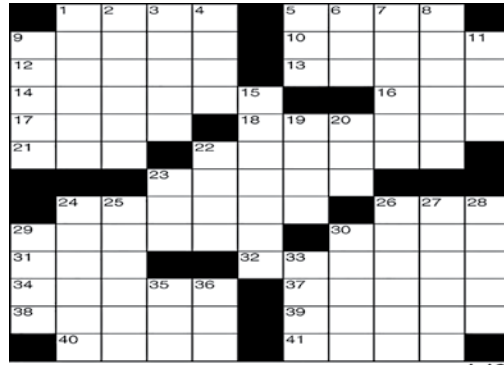
## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Penny
- 5 Mural setting
- 9 "West Side Story" heroine
- 10 Assumed name
- 12 Make law
- 13 Honking birds
- 14 Short races
- 16 That woman
- 17 Nantes notion
- 18 Survived
- 21 Sedan or SUV
- 22 Math comparisons
- 23 Fence supports
- 24 Japanese entertainer
- 26 Nile serpent
- 29 Kind of glasses

### DOWN

- 1 Calgary's country
- 2 Pencil end
- 3 Alcove
- 4 London museum
- 5 Funny fellow
- 6 Tavern drink
- 7 Deceives
- 8 Mascara targets
- 9 Army healer
- 11 Canary snack
- 15 Cuts drastically
- 19 "— girl!"
- 20 Pop's daughter
- 22 Optimistic
- 23 Chart model
- 24 Deep cuts
- 25 Flammable gas
- 26 On the beach
- 27 Boat backs
- 28 Does some modeling
- 29 Group of actors
- 30 Fall flower
- 33 "The Thin Man" dog
- 35 Sly one
- 36 Attempt



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



## BEETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES



## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.