

Empathising with refugees



MORSALINE MOJID

I was recently conversing with a friend living in Cox's Bazar who was boiling with anger against the Rohingya refugees on their prolonged stay in the camps in Bangladesh.

Perhaps, many Bangladeshis like my dear friend share the same angst about how long we will have to carry the "burden" of one million refugees. The nation that pleaded with the government to open their borders for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya waiting on the other side has slowly shifted from a kind-hearted host to a sceptical one. I could argue with him about the human "right to have rights", right to self-determination, or Kant's "right of temporary sojourn". However, such a perspective takes a while to inculcate and would be extremely difficult to argue in a brief conversation. I kept thinking about what could be a practical way to empathise with refugees or to see refugees as someone like him or me.

A common understanding across every nation-state is that our civic duty extends only to citizens of the same nation. Some immigration scholars (functionalists) argue that nations' moral obligation first ought to be inclined to "our people" or "our own poor." These ideas of a nation's moral obligation are premised on two assumptions—one, our state does not cause the harm that led to refugee movements and two, only those states who induce the refugee problem are responsible for refugees.

One way to rise above these assumptions is if we could view a nation-state as a refugee-generating scheme. Every state or nation-making process is built on the binary of



Two Rohingya refugee children at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border near Cox's Bazar, taken on January 12, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/TYRONE SIU

constructing citizen vs non-citizen/citizen vs refugee. If this idea of the nation-state is too abstract to you, think once of how many refugees and asylum seekers have stemmed from your country, while at the same time, you think your nation is not related to the plights of refugees. How many Bangladeshis know that in the year 2019, 17,587 people "fled" Bangladesh and applied for asylum in EU countries? Between 2014 and 2019, 160,737 Bangladeshis sought political asylum in countries including the US, Canada, the UK, Italy, Japan and South Africa.

News of the deportation of "illegal"

Bangladeshi migrants from different countries and transit routes, including the US, Singapore and Libya, are not unheard of. In 2016, NBC News followed up the story of Jahed Ahmed, who fled from political repression to seek asylum in the US by traveling all the way through South America. This route to the US through South or Central America has been a common one throughout 2018 and 2019. So much so that Bangladesh has been in the list of top five nationalities, among other African and Asian countries, who take this route. Recently, the migrant caravans that traveled from Central America to the US-Mexico

border included Bangladeshis who requested asylum in the US. In 2012, Bangladesh was one of the four countries from where Brazil got most of its asylum seekers and refugees—1,608 Bangladeshis requested refuge there between 2017 and 2019. These are only partial statistics. My argument here is that if a nation thinks adversely of taking on some other nation's "burden", perhaps we should also try to comprehend how every nation can create a "burden" for other nations.

As of 2020, around 82.4 million people are either refugees or displaced from their homes, the UNHCR said on Friday. In the near future, the number

of refugees and displaced people will continue to increase because of the impacts of climate change. Not to mention, Bangladesh is one of the countries threatened by the imminent sea-level rise and more likely to produce millions of climate refugees. Currently, environmental issues like river erosion that is causing internal displacement will be escalated by sea-level rise by 2050, which could potentially displace 25 to 30 million people in Bangladesh, who are likely to be pushed towards transboundary migration.

This is not the time when we can shy away from the refugee crisis—instead, it is high time when every nation should collectively push for more liberal rights for refugees. Humanitarian laws are filled with built-in loopholes that obstruct providing justice to refugees. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention does not even recognise climate refugees—only recently did the UN, for the first time, recognise a man from the Republic of Kiribati who applied for asylum on the basis of climate change. To even attain legal protection as refugees, one must have a nationality, and there is a lack of responsibility towards stateless people under international law.

Thus, before we harbour a negative attitude towards refugees, we could empathise with the concession a refugee is paying for a bare minimum living. When we rage against refugees for being "free riders", we could think of the fact that, every day, they are faced with a choice between food, livelihood, shelter and freedom of movement—which should not be choices in the first place. We could broaden our views by seeing them more as victims of a "situation." Refugees deserve dignity and respect, since they are the survivors of dreadful persecution.

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Apparel industry needs a clearer strategy for donor funding



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

INTERNATIONAL donors have played a key role in the development of the Bangladesh economy in recent years. Many global donors have

huge purse strings and are often able to fund projects that otherwise might not get off the ground. In other cases, they can provide funding for ongoing sustainability work in supply chains where, for instance, suppliers might have difficulty in accessing finance due to the long-term return on investment (ROI) on the project.

In most cases, donor programmes involve a range of actors and might see the donor body itself, brands or retailers, local government representation, suppliers and other local entities working in tandem on a particular project.

While grants and other funding are much welcomed in Bangladesh, the question is, could such money be used better? Could it be better targeted and could project work be better coordinated to lead to improved and more efficient outcomes in Bangladesh? Could and should we be doing things differently to maximise return on donor investment?

These questions are more relevant than ever at the present time, given the serious financial impact the pandemic has had on the Bangladesh economy. In short, we must ensure that every cent that comes into Bangladesh punches its weight and has an impact.

At present, where donor aid in Bangladesh is concerned, the picture is fragmented. There are many projects being implemented by numerous different donors. Drawing up the complete picture of who is doing what would be a difficult challenge because there is such a diverse programme of work taking place at any one time.

While it is good that Bangladesh has been so successful in attracting

abundance of financial support for some issues but not enough support for others.

It has been recognised for years that there is an urgent need for more support in areas such as social compliance, negotiation skills, workers' mental and physical health, and resource efficiency. How can we better coordinate funding streams to direct resources to areas such as these?



Could and should we be doing things differently to maximise return on donor investment?

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

funding, one of the challenges this brings is duplication due to a lack of coordination. There are similarities among many of the projects being implemented and, in some cases, an overlap of the work of the same donors.

This lack of overall coordination brings a number of issues. Firstly, it leads to a situation where there is an

Another factor here is that when multiple projects are being run on the same or similar issues by different organisations, we do not get a proper cost-benefit analysis of each project. Who is measuring the impact of this work and how can we differentiate the impacts of each project from one another? Nobody wants to see money

being wasted or used inefficiently, and it is in all our interests to ensure there is a return on donor investment. I think we would all accept that some donor projects have more impact than others and we need to begin asking why this is the case and learn lessons.

A few examples of why projects do not achieve intended consequences include their lack of scale (e.g. focused on just a tiny batch of factories); there is no plan to consider how the work will continue after the donor has pulled its support; donors are often only interested in pilot schemes of two to three years (and factories do not want to contribute financially thereafter); there are no clear key performance indicators (KPIs) or, in many cases, the KPIs are focused on, for instance, numbers of people trained rather than actual impacts; and finally, a lack of collaboration between various stakeholders and agencies involved.

Another factor I have noticed, which could hinder the impact of donors, is when the project work is led by the donor and based on their priorities. While this approach is understandable, could we perhaps see more involvement from owners, managers, local unions and other local stakeholders in outlining the issues we need to address? If local stakeholders do not fully "buy in" to the work identified by the donor, their interest will soon wane and there is a danger that donor money will be squandered.

One more issue which can cause a problem, in my experience, is the lack of sectoral expertise in donor teams. Again, this emphasises the need to use and lean on local expertise to clearly outline where resources need targeting. Although the Ministry of Planning is

the in-charge of planning and projects for the whole country, taking into consideration the importance of the apparel industry to the economy of the country as well as donor's interest in the development of this sector, a special coordination cell or unit could be established within the Ministry of Commerce for only the projects related to this industry. Any proposed projects in the Bangladesh RMG sector would go via this cell, which could coordinate all donor inputs to Bangladesh.

By having a "gate-keeper" such as this, we would be able to ensure that projects are not being duplicated. The cell could use a digital database which, as well as coordinating, could flag necessary areas' action and identify potential donor partners to support us in tackling them.

However, to ensure the transparency and accountability of the cell itself, an advisory council could be formed. The advisory council could potentially be made up of industry experts, representatives from the embassies of the major fund-giving countries and representatives from trade bodies like BGMEA, BKMEA and BTMA. The council could then sit with the cell on a regular basis and identify the hotspots where funding is needed, as well as carry out regular reviews to evaluate the impact of ongoing projects.

Bangladesh is hugely privileged and grateful to receive financial support from the international community—from donors and development partners. It is up to us to ensure we spend the money of our partners wisely.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE) and Bangladesh Denim Expo.

QUOTABLE Quote



SAM LEVENSON (1911—1980) American humorist & writer

Don't watch the clock; do what it does. Keep going.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

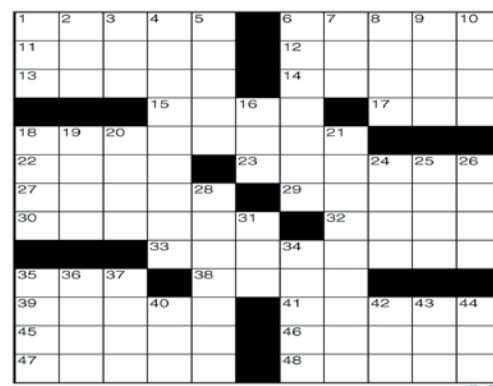
ACROSS

- 1 Highway exits
- 6 Hoe targets
- 11 Pacific, for one
- 12 Great confusion
- 13 High-strung
- 14 Game setting
- 15 Shaker fill
- 17 Volleyball need
- 18 Be deliberately unproductive
- 22 Somewhat, in music
- 23 Talks big
- 27 Tolerate
- 29 Shred
- 30 Rat or muskrat
- 32 Bowling site
- 33 Under pressure
- 35 Fast plane
- 28 Wife of Zeus
- 39 French farewell

- 41 Following
- 45 Burgundy and Bordeaux
- 46 Paris river
- 47 Fashion
- 48 English county

DOWN

- 1 Turn bad
- 2 High card
- 3 Fellows
- 4 Phone unlockers
- 5 Furtive one
- 6 "Why?"
- 7 Corn unit
- 8 Divisible by two
- 9 Finished
- 10 Jazz singing style
- 16 Tennis hit
- 18 Ship pole
- 19 Timber wolf
- 20 Litmus red-dener
- 21 Emergency defenses
- 24 Relaxing resorts
- 25 Melody
- 26 Went fast
- 28 Gush
- 31 Number after due
- 34 Make blank
- 35 Spielberg movie
- 36 Fix a story
- 37 Minuscule
- 40 Twisty fish
- 42 "My country—of thee"
- 43 Hydrocarbon suffix
- 44 King, in Latin



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEEBLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



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