

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 2, 2021, BHADRA 18, 1428 BS

## What are road digging guidelines for, really?

Authorities must make the contractors follow rules

IT'S worth re-posing the question that town planners raised at a recent virtual press conference organised by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners on "Contemporary Planning and Development Management". The rueful query as to why road digging guidelines are not being followed merits an answer from all the ministries and service providers concerned. Two important issues came up at the press conference: the timing and duration of road digging, and the disregard for the guidelines by contractors.

Indeed, we would like to ask: Why are most of the road diggings done during the rainy season in violation of the existing rules and procedures? In fact, our experience as residents of Dhaka is that a good number of the city roads remain excavated for months on end. As per an estimate cited by a local daily, over 700 kilometres of roads and footpaths in Dhaka alone had reportedly remained excavated for several months last year. Needless to say, such a situation has a direct impact on the commuters as well as residents during monsoon. Apart from affecting the flow of traffic and hampering pedestrian movements, roads under repair may cause accidents and deaths; they are also breeding grounds for mosquitoes. It is also quite strange that 30 percent of Dhaka roads are damaged and have remained in that condition for a long time, due to unplanned excavation and development work of the service agencies, as one report informs us.

This is an issue which has been flagged by the media ad nauseum, without any visible effect, regrettably. We have constantly pointed out that there is hardly any coordination amongst the agencies. Roads in Dhaka are dug by individual service providers whenever they feel the need to do so. The roads are excavated for laying electrical cables, sewer lines, water pipelines, gas pipelines, etc. throughout the year. And this is bound to happen when there is no nodal ministry or agency to ensure coordination among the 52 agencies of 19 ministries.

The Metropolitan Road Excavation Policy, 2019 clearly states that development work in Dhaka should remain suspended between June and October. However, for the authorities to only say that contractors do not follow guidelines is just a fig leaf intended to cover their own failures. Why can't they be made to follow the rules to the letter? We are all for development, but that must not impose extra hardship on the people. And it is up to the ministries and agencies to ensure that the discomfort that any development work entails is not exacerbated by the negligence of the service providers or their failure to comply with the regulations.

## What Afghanistan does with its 'freedom' is critical

The crisis there is clearly far from over

AFTER two decades of foreign occupation—by the US and NATO forces—Afghanistan is finally and unequivocally a "free" nation, after the last US troops officially left Afghan soil meeting the August 31 deadline. This, in a way, should be a proud moment for Afghans, as no nation should have to bend to the wishes of others or live by the dictates of outside forces. Therefore, despite justifiable concerns about the aftermath of Taliban takeover, we are happy to see Afghanistan once again retake its destiny into its own hands. However, as is often the case after a nation gains its freedom, there are plenty of challenges as well.

The situation there right now is extremely chaotic. The Taliban have yet to form a government, and many are still unconvinced that they will not rule with the same iron fist that they did between 1996 and 2001—many Afghans themselves fall into this category. In order to become a well-functioning, rights-respecting and equitable state, the Taliban will have to make many changes to how it previously ruled—for example, it has to allow women full participation in education, the labour market and in the functioning of the state. Without making these changes, the Taliban will never be able to steer Afghanistan towards a bright and prosperous future.

Meanwhile, the US withdrawal over the last days and weeks was chaotic in its own right. Many people who had helped the US and its allies have been left high and dry by their foreign friends, and it would be unwise for the Taliban to persecute them at this historic time for the country. Instead of resorting to more violence, the Taliban should seek to make peace with everyone, especially rival groups and ideological opponents. And in the formation of a new government, it should try and include people from all groups, regions and backgrounds so that Afghanistan can mend its own internal divisions—which, as history tells us, have been exploited by foreign forces for too long.

The international community, which has so often failed the Afghan people, also has a big responsibility. According to UN officials, Afghanistan is presently standing on the brink of a "humanitarian catastrophe". There is a deep economic crisis brewing inside the country. People are suffering from a lack of basic services and essential items. Here, the international community must provide Afghanistan with the necessary aid—and foreign players should not, as a face-saving bid, look to mount economic pressure on the country. The Taliban must also allow the UN and other aid agencies to operate in a way that suits all parties, especially the Afghan people.

At the end of the day, freedom is a most precious thing, one which should be deeply cherished. However, freedom for a country might not mean much unless the people themselves get a taste of it. It is with that in mind that the Taliban should rule. We wish Afghans the best of luck for the days ahead.

# What should be our development strategies during Covid?

The virus is here to stay, and it should be reflected in our policies



SELIM RAIHAN

SEEING the varying degrees of Covid that the world has experienced over the last one and a half years, we can safely assume that this pandemic is here to stay.

The experiences of different countries as well as data from scientific research also support this idea. Since we are seeing different variants of the coronavirus as well—such as the widespread and more lethal Delta variant—there is no guarantee that even more lethal variants would not emerge in the future. In the earlier days of the pandemic, we thought it would be gone within a year or two, and we would probably be able to go back to what we call the "pre-Covid situation", and we would have something like a "post-Covid situation".

Given the circumstances, however, it seems there will probably be no post-Covid situation, at least not in the way we had expected. The disease will likely continue to exist at varying degrees across the world. Therefore, we need to be prepared to cope with the situation keeping that in mind. We also need to revisit our development strategies accordingly.

But what steps should be considered to achieve that?

We can start with developing some protocols for running economic activities amid Covid. These protocols should involve two major segments. One is sector-specific—how different sectors can function in the middle of a pandemic. The sector-specific protocol would demonstrate that the set of guidelines that is applicable for a manufacturing company might not be equally effective for a service-oriented firm. For example, the protocol for running a restaurant would be different from that of running a ready-made garment factory.

The other segment of protocols should be area-specific—depending on population size and the types and intensity of economic activities. For example, the protocols for Dhaka would be different from the ones for Rangpur, because the type and intensity of economic activities are different in these

two regions.

In order to develop sector-specific and area-specific development strategies, the government should involve the major stakeholders—especially the private sector—representatives from different economic fields, the sectors' experts, and the experts on public health. Those responsible for developing these protocols should also take into account the global experience.

much so that a number of micro and small enterprises had to shut down permanently, and many more may follow. At the same time, we have also observed some deep social losses in terms of poverty and labour market turmoil. We are witnessing large-scale disruptions in the education and healthcare sectors.

In the case of economic recovery, two areas need urgent attention. One of them is vaccination. Without an effective

mechanism for the implementation of these stimulus packages.

Since the onset of Covid, educational institutions have remained closed, and we have not seen any effective work plan to be able to reopen them in the midst of Covid. A somewhat functional online education system and some distance learning processes have been in place. But due to various reasons—especially the high poverty rate, low access to the online learning platforms, and many other challenges—many students have not been able to participate in the online education or distant learning processes effectively. As a result, there are high chances of a significant part of the young generation falling out of the education system, as dropout rates at primary and secondary levels and the incidence of early marriage of girls have escalated during the crisis. Findings from some recent surveys by Sanem and other research organisations confirm these situations. Therefore, there is a need for an effective recovery plan for the education sector. The recovery plan must consider running the education system while keeping in mind that Covid is here to stay for long.

The healthcare sector was in deep trouble even before Covid-19 struck Bangladesh, because of the abysmally low public spending on the sector amid widespread institutional deficiencies in terms of corruption and poor management. Covid intensified these problems. Therefore, the health sector needs major overhauling and institutional reform to combat the long-lasting challenges.

As we acknowledge and understand that there is no getting rid of Covid anytime soon, we can re-think different planning processes for economic and social recoveries. We must move away from the conventional planning processes to confront new challenges and situations. The new planning process will require innovative approaches, a lot of effort from the government, and critical institutional reforms, especially addressing the corruption and institutional deficiencies in a more rigorous way. As this planning process must involve the major stakeholders, we need to move away from the top-down approach and adopt a bottom-up approach to combat the crises.

Selim Raihan is executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem).



Specific protocols are needed to safely and smoothly run the country's development activities during the pandemic.

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

Unfortunately, we have yet to see any initiative from the government to develop such protocols. Over the last one and a half years, we have seen both deterioration and improvement of the Covid situation. The initiatives or steps taken so far to tackle the pandemic have been on an ad hoc basis. We saw that the government was sometimes forced to impose lockdown measures. However, due to weak enforcement capacity, the restrictions were far from effectively executed. The poor implementation of lockdown measures also generated large-scale economic and social losses. A proper assessment of the management of the Covid situation is, therefore, needed to develop the protocols for the coming days.

Covid has caused some profound economic and social shocks and losses. The major sectors of the economy, in particular the micro, small and medium enterprises, have suffered quite a lot—so

vaccination programme, we can't keep Covid under control. The vaccination campaign needs to be stronger, and the uncertainties related to it must be dealt with. The second issue is stimulus packages. There has been no proper assessment of the effectiveness of stimulus packages. Whether these packages reached the affected industries properly or not must be evaluated. Some analyses done by the South Asian Network for Economic Remodeling (Sanem), through quarterly surveys of business firms, reveal that although micro and small enterprises are the most affected sectors, a large part of them have remained outside of the benefit of the stimulus packages. Also, there are widespread systemic challenges in terms of implementing the stimulus packages. The management of these packages has to be effective and transparent, and the institutional deficiencies need to be removed. There should also be a proper monitoring

PROJECT SYNDICATE

## The case for a food systems stability board

SANDRINE DIXSON-DECLÈVE, JOSÉ ANTONIO OCAMPO, and FELIA SALIM

THE Covid-19 pandemic, rising rates of global poverty and inequality, persistent conflict, and the escalating climate and biodiversity crises are shocks and stresses that together contribute to increasing hunger, as well as growing food and nutrition insecurity. To help tackle this urgent problem more effectively, and make the global food system more stable and resilient, governments should consider establishing a new, multilateral, United Nations-led Food Systems Stability Board (FSSB).



'Ensuring the long-term resilience of the global food system will require a significant multilateral collaborative effort.'

PHOTO: REUTERS

Today, between 720 million and 811 million people—about 10 percent of the world's population—go to bed hungry every night, and at least 2.4 billion lack access to a healthy and nutritious diet. Absent major international action, these trends are likely to persist. The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change demonstrates that global warming's effects have left no region untouched, with significant implications for the food system over the coming decades.

Food systems underpin the security of the global economy, as well as national

structures and institutions such as the Committee on World Food Security, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme, and the World Bank. It will also demand concerted attention from heads of state and government, ministers of finance, and the leaders of multilateral financial institutions.

A quartet of international meetings—the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021, the G20 summit in October, the UN climate conference (COP26) in November, and the Nutrition for Growth Summit hosted by the

Japanese government in December—offer a rare opportunity to focus international attention on the hunger and food-security crisis, and its links to the changing climate. Each of these gatherings could pave the way for the creation of an FSSB of national governments and international organisations working to address this issue. This could be part of a broader global effort to enhance food governance and achieve—in the words of the government of Indonesia, which will hold the G20 presidency in 2022—a "just and affordable transition toward net zero."

Moreover, there is an encouraging precedent for such a body. The Financial Stability Board (FSB), established by G20 finance ministers in April 2009 with the aim of preventing a repeat of the 2008 global financial crisis, has positively contributed to global macroeconomic stability and is now an authoritative, independent, and well-respected body. Its findings directly influence the decision-making of G20 finance ministers, as well as that of the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the regional development banks.

In a similar fashion, an FSSB, if established, would be charged with promoting the health and resilience of the global food system, including by addressing issues such as price stability, trade, strategic reserves, and the effects of climate change on production. The board would fully respect national sovereignty, and not issue legally binding recommendations. Rather, it would give credible advice to governments on how to build a food system that is better prepared to withstand future shocks and ensure greater global access to nutritious food.

While governments would decide the precise scope, structure, and composition of an FSSB, we believe the body could play a helpful role in several ways. For example, it could analyse early-warning systems and risk-modelling data on hunger, agriculture, and climate, including from the existing Agricultural Market Information System Database. It could also advise the World Trade Organization and national governments on food-related trade policies, while helping countries respond to changing market dynamics and a volatile climate.

Additionally, the FSSB could support and enable countries to submit voluntary five-year food system risk assessments and resilience plans. It could also gather and share knowledge about global food-trade vulnerabilities, such as those relating to climate change, conflict, lack of crop diversity, pollinator loss, and other threats, and identify and review the regulatory, supervisory, and voluntary measures needed to address them.

The FSSB could support contingency planning for cross-border crisis management, especially with regard to systemically important food crops or areas particularly affected by climate vulnerability, biodiversity loss, and/or future pandemics. Lastly, the board could collaborate with the IMF to include more consideration of risks related to climate, biodiversity, and food and land-use systems in the Fund's regular Article IV consultations with member countries.

The FSSB could comprise relevant national representatives from ministries of agriculture and rural affairs, trade and commerce, health, environment, and finance, as well as international standard-setters and leading scientists in the field of global food-system risks. As with the FSB, the institution's audience would be member states, including heads of government, finance ministers, and other portfolios.

The current absence of an FSSB is a notable gap in the international governance architecture required to bolster the sustainability, equity, and resilience of the global food system in the twenty-first century and beyond. At the UN General Assembly and UN Food Systems Summit—both taking place in September—governments could agree to initiate a one-year consultation process to explore the creation of such a body. By doing so, they could contribute to a better future for hundreds of millions of vulnerable people, and ensure access to food and security for all.

Sandrine Dixon-Declève is Co-President of the Club of Rome. José Antonio Ocampo, a former finance minister of Colombia and United Nations under-secretary general, is a professor at Columbia University and an ambassador of the Food and Land Use Coalition. Felia Salim, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Partnership for Governance Reform, is an ambassador of the Food and Land Use Coalition.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021.

www.project-syndicate.org  
(Exclusive to The Daily Star)