

Just a pledge to end deforestation isn't enough

The world must make a clear and comprehensive commitment to tackling the climate crisis

THE pledge by world leaders at COP26 to end deforestation by 2030 has been met with scepticism by environmental groups across the world, with Greenpeace describing it as a green light for "another decade of deforestation." Given that the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report said, in unequivocal terms, that human-induced climate change had reached unprecedented levels and has already had impacts that are "irreversible" for centuries, and that the UN chief has called this situation a "code red for humanity," it would not be amiss to suggest that far more urgent actions are required.

While it is a step in the right direction that countries like Brazil and Russia, who have been singled out for accelerating deforestation in their territories, have agreed to sign this pledge, environmentalists argue that the world simply does not have the time to wait and see if these countries will stick to their promises. In fact, a similar declaration had already been issued once at a UN climate gathering in New York in 2014, where it was promised that the rate of deforestation would be halved by 2020, and it would end by 2030. However, the grim reality is that no such thing has happened; in fact, deforestation surged in Brazil in 2020, leading to a 9.5 percent increase in its emissions.

In Bangladesh, the situation is no less dire. In March this year, the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) cited UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data in a report, which revealed that the annual deforestation rate in Bangladesh was almost double the global average of 2.6 percent. In the last 17 years, about 66 square-kilometres of tropical rainforests have been destroyed in Bangladesh, and 287,453 acres of forest land has been occupied all over the country. According to the TIB, the misuse of power by the Forest Department and the collusion and incompetence of a section of officials in forest-centric corruption is one of the major obstacles to stopping deforestation and protecting biodiversity in Bangladesh.

We, like every other country in the world, cannot be lax about taking strong and immediate action to end deforestation. Unplanned development activities on forest land, construction of coal-fired power plants near reserved forests, allotment of land around forests for construction of public and private industries and establishments, and corruption and encroachment of forest land are all issues that we need to resolve urgently.

But we cannot do it alone. Almost a quarter of all man-made emissions of carbon dioxide can be attributed to land use activity such as logging, deforestation, and farming, and a majority of this occurs in the developed world, while countries like Bangladesh feel its impacts. We urge world leaders to put forward a comprehensive plan towards ending deforestation, as well as commit to providing loss and damage funding to countries that have felt the worst repercussions of mass deforestation and human-induced climate change.

Dhaka circular rail could be a game-changer

Authorities should consider making it a fast-tracked project

IT is encouraging to note that a South Korean consortium has started its study to assess whether it would invest in the development of a circular railway around Dhaka, under a public-private partnership (PPP) initiative. Apart from technical and financial feasibility studies, the consortium would prepare a step-by-step plan on how to progress with the project, and which portion of the railway should be prioritised.

According to a previous feasibility study carried out by the Bangladesh Railway (BR), the project will take six years to complete and is estimated to cost USD 8.37 billion (more than Tk 70,000 crore). Meanwhile, it is expected that the circular rail network will greatly reduce traffic congestion in Dhaka, which causes an annual estimated loss of between Tk 20,000 crore and Tk 55,000 crore to the economy. However, according to experts, the effectiveness of the project will depend on many other factors, including integrated services, and without proper coordination between the different agencies involved, such an ambitious project would likely face serious problems.

Given the enormity of the plan, the BR study had suggested breaking down the project into two phases. However, the South Korean consortium has proposed an even more conservative approach, breaking it down into four separate phases. What this suggests is that the project will require significant and careful planning—something we have a rather poor track record of. Arranging the required funds could also prove to be a big challenge, which can also be solved through proper planning. Another major concern is the poor track records of the agencies involved in the project. Therefore, although we would like this project to be fast-tracked, given all these concerns, it is certainly worth asking whether that will be viable.

Nevertheless, the project could potentially make a huge difference to people's mobility in and around Dhaka. By allowing workers and traders from neighbouring districts like Gazipur, Manikganj, Munshiganj, Narayanganj, Narsingdi and Tangail to go from one end of the capital to another without having to enter the city, it could potentially be a game-changer in terms of saving people's time and lowering travel costs. Thus, the authorities should look to proceed with the project as soon as possible—having done the necessary work with due diligence.



TOWN planning is both a science and an art of designing and developing urban areas. The job of town planners is to make a city both aesthetically attractive and optimally functional. A planned city can attract private investment and ensure a higher rate of employment and growth. However, a well-thought-out plan requires a multi-disciplinary approach and contributions from a variety of experts, including urban and regional planners, architects, civil engineers, environmentalists, geographers, transport engineers, hydrologists, surveyors, economists, water and sanitation engineers, and even agriculturists. Again, an effective plan needs thorough research to understand the trends of city growth, surrounding environment, transportation network, urban management system, and financing mechanism. The planning has to be a participatory process, so it should take inputs from the landowners, businessmen, public officials, local government representatives, working people, politicians, and professionals.

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Just like planning an urban area is vital, its proper implementation is also critical in achieving the desired space for its residents to enjoy living there. However, both the planning and implementation processes could go wrong.

processes could go wrong—and that's what is happening in Bangladesh. There has been plenty of criticism for our failure in formulating good town plans and ending up with poor physical environments. If we look back, we can see that our master planning methods and

processes have not been appropriate, and as a result failed to produce the desired outcomes.

It is important to note that out of several hundred cities and towns of various sizes in the country, only the four largest ones have undergone full-scale master planning exercises followed by their implementations: Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, and Khulna. The master plans of many other cities have been prepared in recent years, but their

(1958-1978) was implemented to some extent, establishing several housings, businesses and industrial zones like Tejgaon industrial estate, but the successive plans failed to keep pace with the fast population growth, and the demand for serviced land far exceeded the supply. Higher population density in the core areas of the city produced conditions unfavourable to rebuilding and renovation, and unfortunately, failure to come up with a good plan since 1978



Urban area planning is a participatory process, and therefore should include all the stakeholders: from landowners, businesses and local representatives to the working people and professionals.

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

use is still very limited. A master plan lays out the uses of the land—such as housing, offices, businesses, industries, administrative areas, schools, hospitals, roads and streets, open spaces, etc—keeping the future projected development pattern of a city in mind.

Planning is an essential prerequisite for the orderly development of a city. A set of planning standards are followed in formulating a master plan. In Bangladesh, the town planning processes have been unnecessarily long. The physical feature surveys and preparation for detailed land-use plans take an inordinate amount of time to complete and get approved by the government. After the first master plans of Dhaka and Chattogram cities were prepared in 1959, followed by the Khulna city master plan in 1961, the decision to develop the second set of plans came after a long time—in the early 1990s. The Rajshahi city master plan, which was prepared in 1968 and then updated in 1984 and again 20 years later, in 2004, were somewhat better implemented due to the cooperation between the Rajshahi City Corporation and the Rajshahi Development Authority.

The first master plan of Dhaka city

caused a great setback for the city's proper growth. Even the current Dhaka Structure Plan (2016-2035) has not considered the issues of water-logging and traffic congestion properly.

Interestingly, the town plans have a long-term span of 20 years without having medium-term plans corresponding to the national five-year plans. During this long period of time, the urban scenario changes, and the plans become obsolete. The plans are static and, although Section 74 (2) of the Town Improvement Act, 1953 allows to amend the plans when required, there is no mechanism to constantly review and update them based on the realities on the ground.

While the problems of urban living are dynamic in nature, the urban planning concept adopted by the city development authorities has been static, which is not appropriate to tackle the everyday challenges of our cities. The most critical challenge posed by the master plans is related to the forecasted population of the cities and their infrastructural needs. The actual population growth far outpaced the projected growth of the cities and upset the development proposals in the master plans. Although

this was discussed among the planning professionals and policymakers during the 1980s, the subsequent plans did not become dynamic in approach and failed to address the ever-widening challenges posed by rapid urbanisation.

Again, not many consultations were held with the key stakeholders during the planning process, so the master plans turned out to be a top-down exercise. The master plans were also not followed up with development and investment plans. Adequate public control over future development has not been built into the plans, and thus private interests ultimately dictated the horizontal and vertical growth of the cities. This ultimately caused a significant deviation from the plans, but most of it went undetected because of the lack of an effective monitoring mechanism. One major reason for this is also the non-involvement of the private sector in the planning process and securing their buy-in for development of an aesthetically attractive city when the state's control in managing the urban space declines.

The town plans also don't accommodate the needs of people of all social strata, particularly the poor. Consequently, a large number of poor families live in slums in terrible conditions. These people and many lower middle-income families mainly live in the outskirts of the cities. Due to linear development of the cities, rather than a multi-modal mixed pattern of development, they require long-distance travels on a daily basis to the inner city for the purpose of work, causing tremendous traffic congestions.

There is also the issue of ignorance regarding the master plan on the people's part. The city residents don't have much idea about the designated residential areas, reserved open spaces, and land proposed for acquisition for creation of industrial zones, parks, schools, hospitals, offices, etc. Until recently, there was no online and standard building plan application system to make the process easy and quick. Now that it has been introduced, we need to wait and see if the online system works.

The resources estimated in the plans are found to be unrealistic—the actual outlays far exceed the suggested cost of infrastructure and services. One of the fallouts of this weakness in the plan is delay in implementation of major roads and infrastructure, and even housing projects, such as Purbachal and Uttara residential areas in Dhaka.

The town plans need to be formulated on time, be realistic, take care of critical urban issues, and be updated as per requirement. The plans must be adhered to and funded adequately.

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Get the ball rolling to implement effective climate action

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

OVER the last few days here in Glasgow, Scotland, over a hundred world leaders have arrived for the leaders' summit at the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations

Hasina is also here, but this year, she is not speaking just for Bangladesh, but for 48 most vulnerable developing countries, who are members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which she currently chairs.

She also chaired a high-level meeting of the leaders from the CVF countries who are currently in Glasgow, and they released the "Dhaka-Glasgow Declaration," which was prepared under Bangladesh's leadership and agreed

developed countries provide a plan to deliver USD 500 billion over five years—from 2020 to 2024. This will be in the agenda of active negotiations over the next two weeks in Glasgow. They also demand that half the funds go for adaptation in the most vulnerable developing countries—an improvement of the current situation as only 20 percent of climate-related finance has gone into adaptation activities so far.

The next big issue is the loss and



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presides over a meeting titled 'Forging a CVF COP26 Climate Emerging Pact' in Glasgow, Scotland, on November 2, 2021.

PHOTO: PID

upon by everyone. The declaration points out the need to keep the global temperature rise to stay below 1.5 degrees Celsius, which has yet to happen. The second demand is for the rich countries to provide USD 100 billion annually from 2020 onwards—a promise the rich countries made back in 2015, under the Paris Agreement. The developed countries failed to deliver the USD 100 billion in 2020, and again in 2021, and are now formulating a "plan" to deliver it in 2023. The CVF's demand is that the

damage from human-induced climate change, which has become a big concern even in the rich countries now, and therefore needs to be addressed in a more holistic way and at a higher political level, and not just at the technical level which is where it is currently being discussed.

There are also many other agenda items up for discussion, which are relevant to making the Paris Agreement more effective, including the rule book as well as Article 6, which is on the role of private sector involvement in tackling

change, and other countries—both from the South and the North—are keen to learn from Bangladesh.

COP26, thus, offers an excellent opportunity for all the different stakeholders from Bangladesh who are here to demonstrate the whole-of-society approach that we are taking to tackle the global emergency of climate change.

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