

If we don’t save Dhaka now, it may be too late soon

City suffers from innumerable problems on all fronts

CITIES grow or they decline. We have seen this throughout history. But can cities grow and decline at the same time? If you look at Dhaka, with its precariously integral socio-technical system ruthlessly tested every day, it becomes apparent that our beloved capital is increasingly the picture of a city both growing and falling apart. The story of its aggressive development needs no retelling. But look at the price we are having to pay for this—toxic air, harmful noise, unsafe drinking water, perennial waterlogging, heavy traffic, very high population density, astronomical prices of essentials, etc.

It’s no surprise that Dhaka now has the distinction of being simultaneously the second-most polluted city and one of the most unliveable cities in the world. A report by this daily on March 31 details how this has been affecting the lives of residents, with their health risks greater than ever, their movement slower than ever, and their overall life prospects grimmer than ever.

Dhaka’s air quality, for example, remains a constant source of worries. The average PM 2.5 concentration in the capital is 15 times higher than the limit set by the World Health Organization, thanks to unchecked vehicular emissions, factory fumes, brick kiln smoke, and dust accumulations. There is virtually no oversight of this deadly combination of sources. The issue of unsafe drinking water is no less worrying—with even Dhaka Wasa acknowledging presence of pollutants through faulty pipes. The ongoing cholera outbreak has also been blamed on Wasa’s poor supply system. This makes sense when you consider how water, especially in rivers and canals, is regularly polluted through indiscriminate dumping of both household and industrial waste.

Then comes the oft-ignored issue of noise pollution. Acceding to the latest report of the United Nations Environment Programme, Dhaka is now the world’s noisiest city, with the average noise frequency here standing at a stupefying 119 decibels. This constant noise from traffic, construction sites or loudspeakers is causing serious health complications. No less disconcerting is the effect of the horrendous congestions on our roads (due to shortage of roads and a ridiculously inefficient traffic control system), or acute waterlogging (due to inadequate drainage, unplanned urbanisation, and encroachment of wetlands and water bodies), or the lack of parks, playgrounds and green spaces.

The combination of all these problems—not one of which less persisting than the other—can make your worst urban nightmare come true at any moment. Which makes us wonder whether the authorities are at all concerned about Dhaka’s liveability condition. We believe the city is not still beyond saving, but we may not have much time left. We urge the city managers and planners to urgently formulate an action plan with practical and people-oriented interventions.

Consumers must be protected from MFS fraud

It is limiting the expansion of digital economy

WHILE mobile financial services (MFS) are becoming increasingly popular among our population, a large number of clients are being discouraged from using the services because of various types of fraudulent activities. A survey conducted by the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI) found that about one in 10 users have been victims of MFS fraud. The PRI surveyed 7,279 MFS users from 45 districts and 2,000 agents from 13 districts and identified some of the ways in which such frauds take place on this platform. While in many cases, the users’ PINs are compromised, in other cases, the scams involve impersonation; sometimes the users’ accounts are compromised altogether.

What happens after the users fall victim to such fraudulent activities is, a majority of them discontinue using mobile financial services. This is because when they complain to the authorities of such occurrences, the latter often fail to take proper action. The PRI study found a strong link between the time required to address the victims’ complaints and their decision to continue to use MFS—while 95 percent of the fraud victims who had their complaints solved in a day continued to use MFS, around 30 percent of the victims abandoned the platform for good because their complaints were not addressed.

The situation is concerning because if the users lose their confidence in these services, it will be difficult to expand the MFS market in the country, which has huge potential. Currently, 55 percent of our population uses MFS, and if we want to increase their number and go towards at least 85 percent coverage, there is no other way but to address the fraud issue.

So, how do we do that? Experts suggest that before financial inclusion, consumers need digital and financial literacy as the incidence of fraud is relatively higher among the less educated users and untrained agents. Therefore, steps need to be taken by the government and the private sector to educate the people about the basic uses of the MFS. Providing training to all the agents is no less important.

Last but not the least, the consumers must be protected from any kinds of fraudulent activities at all costs. There need to be effective complaints recourse channels with trained staff who are efficient in handling fraud and other complaints and dedicated recourse channels for agents.

ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

A deadlier pandemic lying on our doorstep



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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WHILE Covid-19 captured the attention of the world for the last two years or more, another pandemic has been silently killing countless numbers of people around the world. On March 27, this newspaper reported on an alarming finding: drugs that used to successfully fight diseases are slowly becoming ineffective because of decades of malpractice such as the intake of over-prescribed or self-prescribed medicines. This is known as antimicrobial resistance (AMR), which occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites no longer respond to antibiotics and other antimicrobial medicines. Antibiotic resistance is a subset of AMR that applies specifically to bacteria that become resistant to antibiotics.

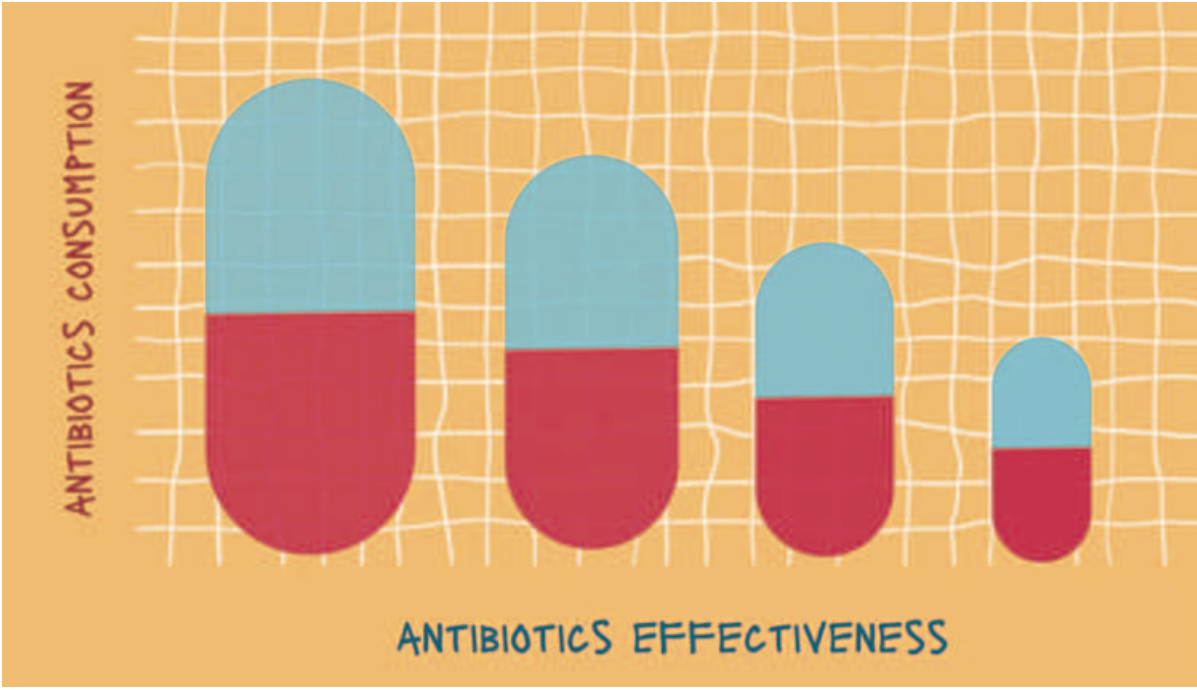
The discovery of this silent epidemic in the country was initially publicised in 2019, following a first-of-its-kind study by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). It was found that at least 10 types of bacteria had become more resistant to 17 life-saving antibiotics used for treating patients with various infectious diseases across the country. According to Dr Zakir Hossain Habib, principal scientific officer at the IEDCR, even though it was a “surveillance study; not a complete picture”, it gave “us an indication of the gravity of the situation... The threat of antibiotic resistance is growing in the country.”

Data from the following years (2020 and 2021), as well as from before (2017, 2018 and 2019), seems to confirm his fears—a report by *The Daily Star* on November 24, 2021, shows how the resistance trend of five of the most critical medicines listed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) has increased year-on-year.

Despite these findings, Bangladesh is already late to this game. In 2013, BestPublicHealthSchools.org had listed AMR as one of the 10 most potentially devastating public health threats on the horizon. And in January this year, The Global Research on Antimicrobial Resistance report, published in *The Lancet*, found that more than 1.2 million people died from drug-resistant infections in 2019, while a further 4.95 million deaths were indirectly associated with antimicrobial resistance in the analysis of 204 countries and territories.

A review of AMR commissioned by the UK government warned that, by 2050, an extra 10 million people will die each year from drug-resistant infections. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh urgently needs to get up to speed to this grave threat.

We need to understand that without effective antibiotics, all manner of conditions—including pneumonia,



▲ **The more antibiotics are used, the more resistant bacteria become to them, meaning that humanity must guard its reserves and slow down the pathogens' adaptive evolution by using them only when necessary.**

VISUAL: AFIA JAHIN

tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, and salmonellosis—could become far deadlier. The more antibiotics are used, the more resistant bacteria become to them, meaning that humanity must guard its reserves and slow down the pathogens’ adaptive evolution by using them only when necessary. This is particularly relevant for us in Bangladesh, where, reportedly, as many as 60 percent

extremely vulnerable to [these kinds] of bad business strategies.”

While the overconsumption of antibiotics must stop, that itself is only half the solution. Antibiotic use in food animals is another factor that contributes to AMR. This makes it a danger to global food security also.

It is time for policymakers to take this threat seriously. Spreading awareness

of patients take medicines without consulting doctors or based on advices from informal providers like drug sellers and others.

But it is unfair to blame the general public alone, as there is still no effective guideline on the use of antibiotics in the country. The sale of drugs without prescription is prohibited in Bangladesh, but not punishable under the Drug Policy of 2016, which is helping the malpractice to go on. Moreover, according to a 2021 IEDCR study, doctors themselves prescribed unnecessary antibiotics to Covid-19 patients in hospitals in 83 percent of cases.

The fact that there is no scientific data on deaths or sufferings due to antimicrobial resistance at the community level in the country further exacerbates this problem. It also illustrates how this issue is yet to be taken seriously at the policy level.

Between 2000 and 2015, antibiotic consumption decreased by four percent in rich nations, but increased by 77 percent in developing ones. The poorer enforcement of medical laws in these countries leads manufacturers to “adopt unethical marketing approaches and develop creative ways to incentivise prescribing among healthcare providers,” according to Dr Giorgia Sulis, an infectious disease physician and epidemiologist at McGill University, Canada. In her words: “A private sector that is highly fragmented and largely unregulated, where a substantial proportion of providers lack any sort of formal medical training, is

among people and formulating the necessary policies are both urgently required.

One silver lining to this crisis is that a group of UK scientists hailed a “game-changing” antibiotic in a new study released on March 29. By developing new versions of the molecule teixobactin, they were able to successfully eradicate a superbug known as Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), which had previously been resistant to antibiotics. Teixobactin had been previously acknowledged as a ground-breaking antibiotic following a study in 2015. But the new research managed to develop “synthetic” classes of the drug, allowing for easier global distribution of the treatment.

This shows the potential benefit of investing in cutting-edge research to develop new antibiotics that may temporarily solve the problem of existing superbugs. But, in the long run, we must all understand that prevention is better than the cure. This means humanity must learn to live a healthier lifestyle, rather than depending on the unnecessary use of medication.

As experts have highlighted, the key to staying healthy is maintaining good nutrition, hygiene and regular exercise, and recognising that human health is closely connected to the health of animals and the shared environment. Which means we have to stop poisoning our environment in every way and more closely monitor what gets put into the animals that we consume.

An emerging power charting its own course

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ANUP SINHA

BANGLADESH’S rise has not been unexpected, but rather a part of a long-term trend. A disaster-prone country that was formerly thought to be riddled with political instability and violence, unable to provide for its own population, is today wealthier than many of its neighbours. It has outperformed many other countries in its region in terms of per capita income, which has attracted the attention of extra-regional powers. It has remembered its oath of supporting anyone in need, and has stepped forward to lend money to Sri Lanka via a currency swap.

Different arguments have been presented as to what contributed to Bangladesh’s remarkable success; but four key areas are generally highlighted: the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, Bangladesh’s demographic dividend, its burgeoning online workforce, and the knowledge-based economy. One argument that has undermined its achievements is that the country has benefited from quota facilities from the US and Europe, which is a key reason for its amazing development.

Yes, several assessments come close to presenting a plausible explanation for Bangladesh’s ascent, in which all four indicators will continue to grow for a variety of reasons. During the pandemic,

Bangladesh did not follow the traditional road of economic diplomacy in pursuing its development ambitions, instead opting to form a developmental relationship with whoever offered a fair bargain that would benefit Bangladesh’s national interests.

Bangladesh specialised in many types of RMG items and also began producing and exporting high-quality personal protective equipment (PPE), which will continue to be in high demand in the near future. As a developing manufacturing force, Bangladesh is moving away from “Made in China” and toward a “Made in Bangladesh” period. For example, Bangladesh’s pharmaceutical industry has grown at an incredible rate.

Bangladesh’s demographic dividend, which may last till around 2040, indicates that it can produce low-skilled and semi-skilled labour in a globalised world. The number of medical institutions that have been created in Bangladesh has been able to generate goodwill, as evidenced by the fact that a number of South Asian countries have sent their students to study medicine in Bangladesh. Lotay Tshering, the current prime minister of Bhutan, is an example of a South Asian student who studied medicine in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is likewise attempting to establish itself as a South Asian IT hub, and is presently the world’s second-largest online labour force supplier. Furthermore, the rise of think tanks and their analysis have paved the way for Bangladesh to transition to a knowledge-based economy, which would ensure the country’s economic viability in the long run. To put it another way, Bangladesh has not followed a traditional western model of growth; rather, it has done so in its own unique way.

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bargain that would benefit Bangladesh’s national interests. As a result, it has established development links not only with China, India and Japan, but also with Persian Gulf countries to expand investment opportunities. Bangladesh has been able to model a unique route for others to follow in order to learn how to achieve “development without hostility”. Academics have coined the term “the next Asian Tiger” to describe the country.

Bangladesh has diversified its port development choices so that it is not too reliant on any one country for the building and operation of its ports. At Matarbari, Bangladesh will have its first deep seaport, which is going to be built with Japanese assistance. As a result, Bangladesh has been designated as a key littoral in the Bay of Bengal region, with access to the Bay expanding Bangladesh’s options to the point that the Bay of Bengal is now considered its third neighbour.

Bangladesh is rethinking the concept of a land-based neighbourhood by emphasising the geopolitical importance of a nearby maritime domain and, as a result, leveraging the Bay of Bengal’s geopolitical advantage. Bangladesh’s geopolitical location, which was formerly considered a curse, has now become a boon.

Bangladesh has been able to attract attention as a result of its strategic location at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal, to the point that India, China, and other great powers desire to be its development partners. A country with a market of 160 million people is not a little country, but rather qualifies as an emergent middle power in its own right.