

The Daily Star

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Make roads safer for our children

Awareness, child-friendly roads and policies are vital

WE'RE deeply concerned about the lack of safety for our children on roads and highways that keep throwing up dead bodies with an alarming frequency. According to data just released by the Road Safety Foundation, at least 1,674 children (up to 18 years old) have been killed in road accidents in the last 28 months, with an average of two children losing their lives every day. Of them, 649 were killed in 2020, 734 in 2021, and 291 in the first four months of this year. This is an alarming statistic by any measure, and deserves the highest degree of attention from the authorities and guardians.

Children, either accompanied or on their own, have to go out just like anyone, but don't have the experience or wisdom of adults to escape the many traps laid out on our roads and highways, which make Bangladesh such a risky country for travelling. Not that the adults are doing much better, with the number of road crashes and casualties rising every year, but children are especially vulnerable in such situations and deserve proper care. This is more so in rural areas, where traffic rules are seldom followed. As per the figures compiled by the Road Safety Foundation, 889 children were killed on rural roads, which is 53.10 percent of total deaths in the time period surveyed. At least 287 children were killed on national highways, and 328 on regional highways. And unsurprisingly, 731 children—or 43.66 percent of all victims—got killed on their way to or from their educational institutions.

It's perhaps no surprise that road accidents, according to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, remain one of the main causes for unnatural deaths of children in the country. If you dig deeper, the red flags begin to emerge. True, as passengers of vehicles, children are as likely to suffer as any victim of road crashes. But they are at a greater risk of being hit or run over by vehicles while jaywalking. Many of the children who died were drivers or helpers of the vehicles that crashed, or were either riders or pillioners on motorcycles. All these are illegal and potentially life-threatening activities, and as a society we have failed to ensure an environment in which children will not be bound to work or undertake risky endeavours.

This is why awareness is so important. We urge the authorities to strictly enforce traffic laws so that underage drivers of any vehicle are not allowed on our roads and highways. Parents and school authorities also have a big responsibility in minimising the risks for children. We also need child-friendly roads and transports. Most importantly, awareness campaigns should be run especially in rural areas so that all, including the children, are aware of the challenges associated with travelling.

Nations must act together to end food crisis

Devastating effects of the crisis are already palpable

IT is unsettling to hear from the United Nations (UN) that the effects of the ongoing global food crisis may last for years, unless actions are taken to overturn the situation. As the Russia-Ukraine war drags on and continues to push up prices, world leaders believe the situation can improve only with the conclusion of the war. Bangladesh, as a developing nation, has already felt the heat from the global market, with the people struggling with skyrocketing prices of essentials.

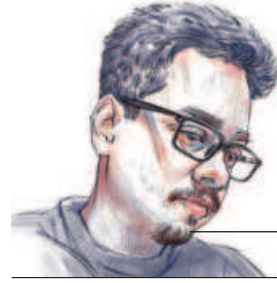
Addressing the situation, the UN secretary-general pointed to the reality that shortages of grains and fertilisers happened because of some perceivable factors, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, rising temperatures, and pandemic-driven supply problems. He expressed caution that, unless effective steps were taken now, tens of millions of people would face severe food insecurity. He stressed that without goodwill on all sides involved in the war, an amicable solution would be hard to reach.

It can be noted that taking cognisance of the worsening food situation, the World Bank has announced an additional USD 12 billion in funding to stave off the "devastating effects" of a prolonged food crisis, which might lead to mass-scale malnutrition, mass hunger and famine in many of the countries where food shortage is already a pervasive phenomenon. Reports show that in many of the far-flung areas, people live in semi-starvation almost half the year. A prolonged food crisis would put the lives of these marginalised people in total jeopardy. Experts fear if the depleting food stocks are not replenished soon, it would push the vulnerable communities towards the edge of famine.

Together, Russia and Ukraine produce 30 percent of the world's wheat. But the Ukraine invasion and subsequent economic sanctions on Russia have disrupted supplies of fertilisers, wheat and other commodities, thereby causing global prices of food and fuel to go up phenomenally. Before the invasion in February, Ukraine was exporting 4.5 million tonnes of agricultural produce per month through its ports—12 percent of the planet's wheat, 15 percent of its corn and half of its sunflower oil. To handle the rising inflation, many countries are now opting for austerity measures to stabilise their economies. Bangladesh, too, is doing what it can to offset the effects.

We urge the world leaders to urgently find a solution to counter the threats and effects of a prolonged food crisis.

Make the national budget relevant again



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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THE number of risks that our economy currently faces because of all the global instabilities is perhaps unmatched since the early days of Bangladesh's independence. Amid this reality, the government is set to present the new budget early next month.

In the last two years, the government had to prepare less ambitious budgets due to the pandemic. But now it has no option but to increase its support for the people, who are suffering both from the after-effects of the pandemic and because of various supply-related shocks due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Simultaneously, debt servicing—particularly after watching what's happening in Sri Lanka—and budgetary deficits are becoming increasing concerns for Bangladesh. In the last fiscal year, Bangladesh's debt-service-to-revenue ratio jumped to 81.2 percent from 56.2 percent in 2019. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Although the risk of debt distress remains low, the risk from a rising debt-service-to-revenue ratio has increased."

And this is where the concern is particularly acute, because for years, Bangladesh has struggled to improve its tax-GDP ratio. Over the last nine years, our highest tax-GDP ratio was an embarrassingly low nine percent in FY2017-18. In the last fiscal year, that declined to 7.6 percent—the lowest in South Asia and one of the lowest in the world.

"Money is really going out of taxpayers' pockets. But it is not going to the state coffers," says Zahid Hussain, former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office. "The money is going to the pockets of various intermediaries in the system." This great leakage is affecting the whole fiscal management of the country. Then there is the issue of tax evasion, which is suspected to be quite common among the political and business elite.

Without increasing tax revenue, the government has no other alternative to finance its expenditure—without increasing the risks of debt servicing. Already, the Finance Division has warned the government to avoid hard-term loans and discourage import of luxury goods

to cope with macroeconomic pressures arising from external shocks. Moreover, it observed that the financial health of commercial banks has weakened due to rising non-performing loans (NPLs), pushing up the costs of letters-of-credit (L/C)—putting greater pressure on our forex reserves—and that the government needs to take initiatives to finish megaprojects on time, which would

Bangladesh is spending around 2.5 percent of its GDP on health, which is the lowest in South Asia. Numerous studies have shown that, because the out-of-pocket expenditure for healthcare services is so high, the majority of people are just one health crisis away from going below the poverty line. In fact, many people have gone below the poverty line because of some form of health emergency.

Understandably, the allocation for subsidy is being revised upwards by 24.1 percent to Tk 66,825 crore in the next budget. The alleged purpose of this is to keep prices low, amid volatility in the international market. But will that purpose really be served?

If we take the power sector for example, the government for years has been paying for far more generation than we need, while making very little improvement in transmission capacity. Therefore, crores of taka from the public fund have been wasted to subsidise the overcapacity in power generation. Will the new increase in subsidy similarly get flushed down the drain?

To pay for the increased allocation in subsidy, the government is set to slash funds for the annual development programme (ADP) by 7.89 percent. According to Dr Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem), "Whenever there is a budget cut, it is the ADP that is the main casualty." But development activities should get priority over non-development aspects of the budget.

While that is true, how useful would that be? After all, since FY2008-09, the government has not once been able to implement the budget fully. In its recommendations for the upcoming budget, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) said, "Over the last decade, the budgetary target setting in Bangladesh has primarily emerged as a numbers game."

But the budget needs to be more than that. As the World Bank explains, "Accurate revenue and expenditure forecasts are a key input to the preparation of a credible budget. In Bangladesh, overly optimistic expenditure allocations are presented with aspirational revenue targets." Which, in short, translates to: the government plays politics with the budget.

It is unclear how long the government can afford to do so, but it is clear that the people no longer can. Neither can they afford the government's poor execution and waste of budgetary allocations. The sooner the government realises that, the faster it can work on making the budget relevant again, and for the right reasons.



VISUAL: STAR

relieve some of that pressure. But these recommendations have been conveyed to the government for years now. Instead of paying heed to them, the government lashed out at anyone who made the suggestions.

Loan payments already account for the fourth biggest head in the overall budgetary expenditure. However, that would not be a problem if loans were judiciously used on financially viable projects which benefited the economy and the people. That must be the government's focus going forward—unlike in the past.

Also, in regard to expenditure, allocations for the education and healthcare sectors have to be increased. Not only that, their capacity to absorb budgetary allocations must also be improved. In the budget for FY2021-22, the education sector received only 2.08 percent of the GDP. In its Education 2030 Framework for Action, Unesco recommends allocating four to six percent of GDP for education. However, at the current rate of resource allocation, the education budget as a share of GDP may only reach up to 2.15 percent in 2025 and 2.26 percent in 2031.

Even in the post-Covid period,

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

The global hunger crisis is here



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GLOBAL food prices are soaring. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index—which covers a basket of basic food commodities (cereals, meat, dairy, vegetable oils, and sugar)—reached an all-time high of 159.7 in March, up from 141.1 the previous month. While it declined slightly in April, to 158.5, ongoing developments—not least Russia's war in Ukraine—are set to keep driving prices to new highs, with devastating implications for global hunger.

The Covid pandemic exposed the fragility and dysfunctionality of the world's food systems, with movement restrictions and supply chain disruptions driving up prices, damaging rural livelihoods, and exacerbating food insecurity, especially for the poor. Now, the war in Ukraine is compounding these challenges, because both sides are major exporters of food, fuel, and fertiliser. Moreover, climate change poses an even larger threat to global food security. Already, extreme weather like heatwaves, floods, and prolonged droughts has triggered shocks to agricultural production and food availability. As temperatures rise, these shocks will become increasingly frequent and powerful. If global warming crosses the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold (relative to Earth's pre-industrial temperature), they are likely to become catastrophic.

As the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report shows, avoiding the threshold will require immediate and drastic action. But mitigation is only part of the challenge. Large-scale investments in adaptation

will also be needed to protect vulnerable communities from the warming that is already locked in.

Even under the most optimistic mitigation scenario, global warming is expected to hit the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold in a decade, before receding. This will result in shifts in climatic zones, rising sea levels, and disruptions to the water cycle that increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather. Beyond raising economic and health risks, the resulting disruptions to food and water supplies are likely to drive social and political upheaval, fuelling a vicious cycle of poverty, hunger, instability, and even conflict, accompanied by a sharp rise in migration.

A more resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system must be a pillar of any climate mitigation or adaptation agenda. But the barriers to building such a system should not be underestimated, especially for countries and regions where soil is poor, land has little agricultural value, natural resources such as water are limited or degraded, and socioeconomic conditions are difficult.

Given the low productivity of their agricultural land, such marginal environments are unable to support the sustainable production of sufficient food to meet local people's nutritional needs. In fact, while marginal environments are home to less than 25 percent of the global population—an estimated 1.7 billion people—they account for 70 percent of the world's poor and most of its malnourished.

Poverty and hunger can lead farmers to overuse fragile environmental resources in order to ensure their short-term survival, even at the cost of long-term depletion of their lands and impoverishment of their households and communities. Those living in remote areas with minimal infrastructure, few alternative economic opportunities, and limited market access are particularly likely to make such choices.

Given this, countries with significant

marginal lands rely on food imports—in some cases for more than 80 percent of their needs. But pandemic and war-related disruptions, together with the price increases they have fuelled, have shown just how vulnerable such countries are. According to the FAO's State of Food and Agriculture 2021 report, an additional 161 million people were affected by hunger in 2020, compared with 2019. And the World Food Programme is now cautioning that the combination of conflict, Covid, the climate crisis, and rising costs has pushed 44 million people in 38 countries to the edge of famine.

With countries struggling to secure enough food to meet their populations' nutritional needs, many are now re-evaluating their food dependencies and seeking to expand local production. But unless sustainability is taken into account, efforts to increase short-term resilience by shortening supply chains could undermine medium- and long-term resilience by further depleting agricultural resources like soil and water.

Sustainability isn't cheap. Efficient production amid biophysical and climate constraints requires investment in costly technologies. But poor governance structures, limited growth prospects, and high debts pose major challenges for many countries. The pandemic has placed massive strain on public budgets, and debt crises loom for many governments, as loans taken out to address the pandemic come due.

Poor and vulnerable countries cannot be expected to address the myriad interconnected challenges they face—from pollution and biodiversity loss to hunger and poverty—without help. To bolster long-term food and nutritional security, we must look beyond country-level solutions to regional and international ones that consider the needs of communities living in marginal environments. Otherwise, there will be no escaping destabilising cycles of hunger, migration, and violence.

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