

## Floodplain development is sabotaging our future

We must learn from Sylhet flooding and undo past mistakes

As a country caught in the throes of a profound climatic change, having just experienced the most devastating flood in recent years, Bangladesh can no longer deal with floods with a business-as-usual approach. Flooding patterns are changing fast, which requires a critical inspection of our vulnerabilities. Increasingly, flooding is as much a natural phenomenon as an artificial construct, thanks to human interventions in floodplains and other low-lying areas. As a study now shows, in less than two decades, the number of people exposed to flood risks in Bangladesh rose by 1.5 crore due to human settlements and infrastructural development in floodplains.

The study, covering the period between 2000 and 2018, demonstrates the extent of such unplanned development. And it's quite startling. Within the 2km river buffer locations across the country, forests shrunk by 91.98 percent, grassland 6.02 and barren areas by 27.92 percent. Meanwhile, built-up areas have increased by 11.06 percent over the period. On the other hand, the areas of human settlements and infrastructural developments have expanded to 778.74 sq km within that buffer zones. All this has been blocking rainwater discharge, thus prolonging flooding and putting more people and households at risk of submergence, especially those within the 2km river floodplains.

The recent Sylhet flood offers a perfect example. It was mostly the result of filling up of hoar areas and unplanned development of structures including roads, sluice gates, dams, etc. Floods brought on by heavy rains and onrush of water from the upstream couldn't subside because of these barriers, leading to what one expert called "waterlogged flooding". A recurrence of this situation cannot be averted without improving the water retention capacity of haors and the navigability of connecting rivers. This also goes for all riverbanks and floodplains in the country, which are increasingly being encroached regardless of the threat it poses.

Rivers, haors and such waterbodies should be connected with other rivers, haors and waterbodies, and no unplanned infrastructure should be allowed in the floodplains. Rivers should also be regularly dredged. This should have been our goal given the risks we face. Unfortunately, despite the authorities acknowledging the risks of encroachment and loss of navigability, preventive measures have been few and far between. Most of those were not effective either, as evidenced by the futility of nationwide dredging initiatives that often saw scooped-out mud ending up back in rivers. As for clearing out floodplains, we rarely see any substantive action. The result is now for everyone to see.

This cannot be our reality going forward. With the unprecedented frequency and intensity of flooding threatening to sabotage our future, the government must stop encroachment of riverbanks and floodplains, and any infrastructure hampering the normal functioning of rivers must be removed. Citizens too must be aware of the long-term effect of such developments.

## Time to address growing digital divide

Authorities must take steps to improve digital access

It is disappointing to learn of the growing digital divide in the country, which once again came to the fore after the release of the preliminary report of the Population and Housing Census 2022. Reportedly, around three crore people over the age of 18 do not own a mobile phone, while 6.5 crore people from the same group do not use the internet. Access to a phone or internet is much less if you lower the age bracket. These figures emerge on the heels of a recent report that showed how people are not fully benefiting from the 761 digitalised government services due to bad servers, lack of user-friendliness, and slow internet speeds. Taken together, these findings make our dream of a "Digital Bangladesh" look more distant than one would have expected.

According to estimates by the GSMA, about half of the population remains unconnected to a mobile network, and only 31 percent are using mobile internet services. Some think that the low levels of mobile phone ownership and internet use are due to network operators not being allowed to sell SIM cards and smartphones as a package. Besides the business side of things, lack of digital literacy and access among the people is something that is not being considered with the urgency that it demands, especially with regard to Bangladesh's digital advancement and connectivity.

Many use internet for simple entertainment purposes. But when it comes to getting a service online, most of the population is not digitally literate enough to conduct the process seamlessly, and are often forced to employ the services of intermediaries to get what they need. This is not digital empowerment. And the fact that these online services are often poorly designed makes it all the more difficult for such citizens to become integrated into the digital arena.

The goal of digitalisation in any platform must be to make the lives of citizens easier, saving time and money. But recent data indicates that the government may only be undertaking digitalisation just for the sake of it, while bringing pre-existing challenges into the online services as well. We urge the government to improve the state of services currently being offered online before expanding their coverage. If the services are not easily accessible, it will hardly encourage citizens to increase their digital participation. At the same time, the government must help improve digital access and literacy so that citizens can get the maximum benefit out of the digital age.

# Here's how we can beat the heat waves



### MACRO MIRROR

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The world is feeling the scorching heat this summer, with heat waves sweeping across several countries in Europe and Asia. Miles after miles of forests are burning. All living beings are affected by the extreme temperature – there have even been cases of people dying from it.

Heat waves are a manifestation of major climate change impacts, just like increased floods, cyclones, droughts and other natural calamities. Scientists see this as the result of global warming, which is caused by human activities. To carry out economic activities, countries have depended heavily on the extraction and use of natural resources and fossil fuels. In recent years, the climate has changed quite rapidly, according to the sixth assessment report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The AR6 has further warned that heat waves and humid heat stress will be more intense and frequent this century.

Analysing temperature data, the World Weather Attribution (WWA) suggests that India and Pakistan are 30 times more likely to face deadly heat waves due to climate change. Bangladesh, too, experiences hot weather during a substantive period of the year – longer than what used to be decades ago. The rising temperature has created challenges for human health – the mortality and morbidity due to heat-related causes pose serious concerns. The high temperature is also affecting economies adversely.

However, the impact of climate change falls on people disproportionately. The poor and underprivileged people who work outdoors during the day are the worst hit. Farmers, day labourers, rickshaw-pullers, construction workers and street vendors have no choice but to work for their livelihoods despite the heat. This has a toll on their health and productivity, which in turn affect their income. City dwellers are suffering from low productivity, exhaustion, and heat stroke, living in congested, multi-storey buildings, and without greenery and waterbodies. More and more people are getting dependent on air conditioners, which guzzle high



The heat waves experienced across the world this year is a clear indication that climate change is happening faster than we thought.

VISUAL: STAR

amounts of electricity and also cause greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Schoolchildren who use public transport to travel to and from school are also affected by the scorching heat and are vulnerable to health risks.

All these can be prevented. Human lives, livestock, and wildlife can be saved if appropriate and timely measures are put in place. Economic losses due to extreme heat can also be reduced through mitigation and adaptation measures. The existing mitigation and adaptation measures should incorporate preventive actions for heat and other weather-related shocks. Such measures are required at three levels: global, national, and individual.

Since the fossil-fuel-dependent economic activities of developed economies are the biggest cause of climate change, major commitments to finding ways to tackle it will have to come from them. To this end,

to the Russia-Ukraine war, several European countries are planning to go back to coal-based power generation, which is a major departure from their COP26 commitments. Last month, Germany announced plans to revive its old coal-fired power plants in view of reduced gas supply from Russia. Later, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands also said they would go back to using coal to generate power. European countries are worried about the upcoming winter when they would need higher energy reserves to keep their people warm.

It has been established by the IPCC time and again that the business-as-usual consumption pattern of fossil fuel will not help the world to reach its goals of capping the global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees Celsius. Therefore, the decision to fall back on coal is worrying, since it can have implications on climate commitments. This will imply that the extreme

## Don't let fuel shortage undo RMG success



### RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE world is in an uncertain situation right now – arguably even more so than when the pandemic was at its height in 2020-21. The talk of the town around the world – among policymakers, governments and industry leaders – is energy. In recent months, global energy prices have soared, and ready-made garment (RMG) makers in Bangladesh have been feeling its impacts these past few weeks.

Why are energy prices on the rise? The answer is the war between Russia and Ukraine. Russia was previously a major energy supplier to the West. However, countries such as the US, UK and Germany have boycotted Russian goods and encouraged their businesses (many of them fashion brands) to pull out of the Russian market. In retaliation, Russia has restricted energy supplies to Europe. This has led to rising prices regionally, which is ultimately having a knock-on effect on the global market.

When the war started, many commentators believed it would be over in a couple of months. Clearly, they did not consider Russia's willingness to play hardball and sit things out. There are no signs of any side blinking first, and there are talks of a global energy crisis gripping the rest of 2022.

The upshot of all this is the current situation we are seeing in Bangladesh.

Financial losses for many RMG factories have started to mount as they are being forced to cut down production due to gas shortages. Energy is our lifeblood. Garment makers and other supply chain stakeholders depend on a ready-supply of energy – diesel and gas – to keep our factories running and to complete orders. Our country has been experiencing lengthy power cuts since July 19, sometimes for up to 13 hours a day in some places, as utilities struggle to source enough diesel and gas to meet the demand.

More concerning is the fact that we recently became the third South Asian country, after Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This is because our foreign exchange reserves fell and the trade deficit widened. The taka has effectively slid against the US dollar by around 20 percent in the past three months. As the taka becomes weaker, the cost of importing goods rises.

What is the solution to this problem? I believe the key is to get our RMG factories up and running. As I keep saying, our industry is at a critical juncture. We cannot afford not completing orders as fashion brands may just go to another source – and not return to us. Moreover, we need US dollars to maintain our trade balance. Going cap in hand to the IMF – historically the last resort for countries

with financial problems – is not a good look for our country and harms our credibility.

The fuel mix is the key. At present, Bangladesh's power plants are heavily based on natural gas. Our government has said it plans to reduce dependence on domestic natural gas and increase the use of imported liquefied natural gas (LNG). Until last year,

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the power and energy ministry was reportedly reconsidering plans to shift Bangladesh's fuel mix towards coal. This would have included generating as much as 50 percent of total electricity using coal-based power plants by 2030.

However, plans to build 10 coal-fired power plants were scrapped in June 2021, due to unsatisfactory progress of the projects. Moreover, just a few weeks ago, Japan cancelled funding for the second phase of a coal-fired power plant in Matarbari.

The government is also developing a new Power System Master Plan (PSMP), where the use of coal will get a lower priority due to pressure from environmental groups and

climate events will become common and continue to stay for prolonged periods. This could also have long-term implications. Though some world leaders have assured the situation would not affect the achievement of their climate targets of net zero emission, one cannot be blamed for being apprehensive considering the dependence on dirty fossil fuel.

At the national level, Bangladesh needs to have a heat action plan. Such a plan should have an improved warning system to alert people of an oncoming heat wave threat. Awareness should be raised among people about the effects of exposure to extreme heat. Some basic facilities, such as easy access to drinking water and raising awareness, can be made easily accessible. Time adjustments for work and schooling during hot summer days can give some respite to people and children.

Bangladesh has its Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, which spells out detailed plans to address climate change through both mitigation and adaptation measures. Before COP26, Bangladesh submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) with the commitment to reduce GHG emissions by 6.73 percent by 2030 in five sectors: namely power, transport, industry, waste, and land use. With additional finance and technology from external sources, Bangladesh can reduce its GHG emissions by 15.12 percent.

To ensure agricultural production during extremely hot weather, the country must go for rainwater conservation. Bangladesh uses groundwater for crop cultivation. Such practices should be changed, and we should learn how to use less water and save rainwater. Though such measures are suggested in the climate plan, there is yet no progress on their implementation. The government should take measures immediately to ensure sustainable agriculture and food security during periods of extreme weather events. Other measures such as afforestation, cleaning waterbodies, and banning unfit vehicles on the streets are also very important.

Given the severity of the problem, people also have their parts to play towards combating climate change by changing their behaviours and lifestyles. A collaborative approach is needed for risk management and adaptation strategies. All stakeholders, including the private sector, NGOs, community-based organisations and the general public should be engaged by the government so that they own the responsibility to overcome the challenges of climate change.

development partners. Our customers in the fashion industry would be dismayed if Bangladesh shifted heavily towards coal-powered industry, given the global climate issues. In fact, they may walk away from us as suppliers.

Bangladesh is also looking at importing more electricity from neighbouring countries and expanding the use of renewable resources, such as solar, wind, and hydropower.

As a stop-gap solution, Bangladesh has turned to LNG imports to help meet its growing fuel demands. There are also talks that Bangladesh may have sizable reserves of untapped gas in its offshore blocks in the Bay of Bengal.

I accept that there are no easy solutions, but our government needs to grasp this nettle sooner rather than later. There is no time for indecision. How are we going to secure our energy needs, and how are we going to keep our garment factories running? Garment makers tell me they cannot continue with this uncertainty.

The government must prioritise garment production. Without that, our foreign reserves will dwindle, as RMG is the highest foreign currency earning sector, and we will end up in a downward spiral.

We need a plan, a strategy, and this clearly cannot include a dependence on coal-powered energy (our government should surely know that by now, given the talks that have been ongoing at the global level for years).

We have achieved so much in the past 18 months and bounced back so well from the pandemic fallout. Our policymakers cannot allow this work to be undone due to fuel shortage in power production. The clock is ticking, and our government should treat this issue as a matter of supreme urgency.