The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A housing project in limbo

RAJUK must fast-track its Jhilmil housing project

How many years does it take to finish four years? You'd think that you know the answer, but for RAJUK, an organisation that lives in perpetual slow-mo, four years is not even enough to mark the start of four years. Or that's what it seems from the progress of RAJUK's Jhilmil housing project. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, five years have gone by since the capital's development authority took up the Tk 9,978-crore project in 2017. It was supposed to be completed in four years, but the project authorities could not even start the construction work yet, leading to a bid to sign a new deal and extend the deadline.

Reportedly, the project was taken up under a public-private partnership (PPP) arrangement to build 85 high-rise buildings in Keraniganj, including 13,720 flats. The design also includes lake, park, playground, school, college, hospital, mosque, market, and community spaces. For such a mega scheme to work, there is no alternative to sound planning and execution, which has been missing in this project from the very start. Officially, the delay has been attributed to Covid-induced lockdowns and attendant complications. This may be one reason, but it cannot be the only one given the spotty history of public projects. As well as frequent revisions in the project design and other setbacks, questions have been apparently raised by several RAJUK insiders about the selection of the Malaysia-based BNG Global Holdings, the project's private partner and financier.

One particular change in design is the cancellation of the Fakirapool-Chunkutia flyover project – despite positive feedback from two Buet expert teams – which would have eased communication for the residents travelling to central Dhaka. This is just one example of how residents of such housing schemes of Rajuk often have to make do with substandard and insufficient living facilities despite rosy pictures drawn of them initially. The challenge for now, however, is to get the Jhilmil project off the ground. We're told that it may take five to six more months to sign a new deal, in yet another indication of RAJUK's slow-mo movement. No doubt the project's direct and indirect costs will have far exceeded the original budget by then, which means additional burden on the shoulders of taxpayers. Who is going to answer for that?

RAJUK is no stranger to such botch-ups in its housing projects and services. Inefficiency, corruption and mismanagement by its officials as well as systemic challenges and loopholes frequently come in the way of citizens getting their money's worth from this vital institution. This cannot be how the central housing authority of a fast-expanding, fast-populating capital city is run. We urge the authorities to fast-track the Jhilmil housing project to meet the growing need for residence, and to learn from the problems encountered so that those cannot slow its progress after the new deal is signed.

Wasa MD's unusual trip

State-run organisations and their officials should act responsibly

We are surprised to learn about Dhaka Wasa's Managing Director Taqsem A Khan planning to go on an unusual "study tour" abroad. According to a report, he left for the United States on September 24 for a six-week vacation. However, while still on leave, he will go on a six-day study tour to Japan, possibly from October 2 to 7. During this visit, he will also be in charge of Wasa, according to an order issued by the Local Government Division. Among others who will accompany him are LGRD Minister Tajul Islam and an executive engineer of Dhaka Wasa. We wonder what could be the rationale behind his selection in an official study tour while on leave. Also, can one be on leave and still in charge of an institution, as he will be during that time? These clearly circumvent existing norms and processes.

Moreover, in the government order, there has been no mention of what education the LGRD minister and Wasa MD will acquire during their visit to Japan. Reportedly, Dhaka Wasa will construct five sewage treatment plants around the capital as per its master plan. The Asian Development Bank will finance one of these plants and is financing the Japan trip as well. Sources say that through the Japan trip, the participants are supposed to learn how a sewage treatment plant under the jurisdiction of Tokyo Metropolitan's Bureau of Suarez is constructed as well as its working process. So, this trip might actually be helpful for officials who would implement the project. But whether those who are going on this trip are the right persons for this training is the question.

Over the years, foreign trips by government officials have become a rather useless exercise since, more often than not, these trips or study tours have brought no result whatsoever. Earlier this year, the government decided to stop foreign trips of officials as part of austerity measures considering the economic crisis the country was facing. But this directive was hardly followed by the government agencies concerned. Even though the upcoming Japan trip will be funded by the ADB – not the government – we can still question its necessity as it is not clear how the project to be funded by the ADB will be benefitted by this trip. We have previously seen how such expensive foreign tours have turned into nothing but "gifts" doled out to well-connected government officials.

Dhaka Wasa is currently drowned in a sea of problems with corruption and irregularities becoming the norm in this institution. At a time like this, we think its MD and other responsible officials of the state should be careful about what they do or where they go and how. Expensive foreign trips, despite an ongoing ban, should not be encouraged at all at this juncture.

WORLD RIVERS DAY

Can we reimagine rivers before it is too late?

Shamsuddoza Sajen *is a journalist and researcher.*

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

Bangladesh is born of water. The major part of Bangladesh lies in the GBM Delta, which is a confluence of three mighty rivers – Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna. The silt carried by these rivers and their numerous branches have formed most of the landmass of Bangladesh, and currently, the country is gaining 20 square kilometres annually through this process. The rivers are not only our past but also our future. Unfortunately, the rivers no longer have a place in our national imagination. That's why 90 percent of rivers are being occupied and polluted; over the past 20 years (2000 to 2020), more than 43 rivers have died up. Riverine Bangladesh has become the land of dying rivers. Isn't it a tragic irony?

How did we get here? It is well documented that a progressive river management system, maintained by the community with the support of the state, was active in Bengal, which brought her the fame of being the "paradise of nations". However, the chaos following the decline of the Mughal Empire and the advent of British colonial rule disarrayed those indigenous practices. The colonists had the image of peaceful and calm British rivers and, therefore, while dealing with the rough waters in Bengal, they tried to control them. Their arrogance and ignorance led them to undertake projects that proved fatal to the rivers in Bengal. The road-railway network in Bengal, for example, was built in the east-west direction instead of aligning it with the southward course of rivers, and, thus, the natural courses of the rivers were seriously disrupted.

The British left the country, but the colonial legacy remained. The Pakistan government undertook development projects that proved disastrous to the rivers. The Kaptai Hydroelectric Project, for example, on the river Karnaphuli not only damaged the river but also displaced thousands of people who are still suffering from that trauma.

Unfortunately, in independent Bangladesh, we are still obsessed with the idea of development that is apathetic to nature. One recent example is the all-weather road in Kishoreganj. The 29.73 kilometre road was built in the middle of the haor without carrying out a proper environmental survey. Two years into its existence, the road is now causing serious damage to the crops and exacerbating the flood situation by disrupting the free flow of water.

Bangladesh has been spending a significant portion (around 20 percent) of the national budget annually on water development projects since independence, but the water problem in the country is worsening day by day. On the one hand, more and more rivers are losing streams and dying, and on the other hand, the severity of floods is increasing year after year.

The once vibrant Kaliganga river in Manikganj now appears to be on its deathbed. STAR FILE PHOTO

We have failed to understand that it doesn't matter what percentage of the country's GDP is spent on maintaining rivers unless and until rivers are considered the driving force of development. History shows that the prosperity of Bengal was led by trade, not by agriculture. Bengal's intricate river network connecting to sea routes afforded her the opportunity of participating in robust internal and external trade and commerce, and important trade centres developed along the river routes. Since rivers were the lifelines of that time, they were revered and properly maintained. Can we now reimagine a prosperous riverine Bangladesh where rivers will be at the centre of all our plans?

The most important question is who will lead us in this effort. Here, we can learn from the example of Bhabadaha. The permanent polders built around the beels in Bhabadaha between 1965 and 1969 using USAID funding resulted in one of the worst waterlogging problems in Bangladesh, from which thousands of people of the area are still suffering for the last 30 years. Earlier, there used to be an *Oshtomashi Baadh* that would remain functional for eight months of the year to protect crops from high tide. During the monsoon, it would be cut down to let the tide come in and build land through deposition of silts. The permanent polders interfered with this natural process, thus creating a waterlogging crisis during monsoon.

To deal with this, the locals proposed a solution in the form of Tidal River Management (TRM), based on their traditional knowledge and wisdom. Still, the government and engineers of the Water Development Board were against it. However, the local people implemented TRM near Chuknagar, Khulna and found positive results, which forced the government to accept it as a technical solution to the waterlogging problem. But again, local influentials involved in the shrimp business and members of parliament, in collusion with the government, frustrated the local people, and the problem is continuing to date.

There are many such examples in Bangladesh where the state not only failed to protect the rivers but abetted the river polluters and grabbers. It is clear the responsibility of protecting and maintaining rivers must be in the hands of the community, with the state only facilitating that process.

National Professor Abdur Razzaq, in his "Bangladesh: State of the nation" lecture, pointed out that we, Bangladeshis, don't have any distinct features from our neighbours that distinguish ourselves as a separate nation – except the will to be a nation. There is every reason to imagine ourselves as a riverine nation, except the will to do so. Can we create that national will?

We need a Global Summit on Inequality

Andrew Sheng *is one of Asia's foremost economists. He is based in Penang, Malaysia.*

ANDREW SHENG

Life is unfair, but what can we do about it?

Income and wealth inequality is unjust, and yet the world continues to tolerate rising injustices, the most recent being inequalities in vaccine distribution.

French political economist Thomas Piketty and his colleagues at the World Inequality Lab have just published the World Inequality Report 2022, a real goldmine in data and insights on global inequalities. I found at least three nuggets inside that are blindingly obvious, but no one has quite tied it together so well as Piketty and his team.

First, inequality is primarily a political issue. We can all do something about it, but since politics has been captured by money, the few remain more equal than the many. Between 1995 and 2021, the top one percent wealthiest people in the world captured 38 percent of the growth in global wealth, whereas the bottom 50 percent had a pitiful two percent share. Similarly, the richest 10 percent of world population take home 52 percent of global income, whereas the bottom 50 percent earned only 8.5 percent.

The Report showed why these inequities could not be reduced despite increases in average income and wealth per capita. The progressive tax rates where the rich paid more than the poor, introduced in the first half of the 20th century to deal with inequality, were dismantled in the 1980s. The neoliberal free market philosophy preached low taxes and small governments to encourage entrepreneurship, but effectively handed more income and wealth to the elite few.

Piketty's second historical insight is that Europe and later America got rich on the back of both the Industrial Revolution and colonisation. In 1820, inequality between countries (inter-country) was only 11 percent of global inequality, meaning that most inequality was domestic (intra-country). But inter-country inequality rose when the West advanced with industrialisation and resource extraction from the colonies. That peaked in 1980, when it represented 57 percent of global inequality. Since then, the rise in income of China, India and other newly independent countries narrowed the gap with the West, but by 2020, domestic inequality again accounted for 68 percent of global inequality. This meant that the developing countries allowed their own inequalities to worsen, even as they were narrowing the gap with the West.

In short, the rich are the same everywhere. They have more and want more.

But there is a twist to this story. One reason why the Rest has caught up with the West is that "nations became richer, but governments have become poor." In essence, because the governments in Europe, North America and Japan used debt to tackle slow growth since the 1980s, private wealth grew at the expense of public wealth. Privatisation policies transferred public wealth such as utilities to the private sector, whereas public sector debt continued to increase. UK and US public wealth, which was around 15 to 30 percent of total wealth before the 1980s, declined to net liabilities of -10 percent to -20 percent of total wealth respectively. Contrast this with China and Russia, where public wealth represents around 30 percent of national wealth, down from 70 percent at the end of the 1980s.

The third Report insight is that inequalities and climate change are highly corelated. Between 1850-2020, half (49 percent) of historical carbon emission was accounted for by North America (27 percent) and Europe (22 percent). China accounted for 11 percent, but has now become the largest emitter, although per capita emission remains lower. A recent IMF study pointed out that "the richest countries represent only 16 percent of the world population but almost 40 percent of CO2 emissions. The two categories of the poorest countries in the World Bank classification account for nearly 60 percent of the world's population, but for less than 15 percent of emissions." The COP26 debate was all about whether China, India and other emerging markets that are increasing their carbon emissions should do more on Net Zero pledges.

The entanglement between CO2 emission and income and wealth levels suggest that climate warming policies should focus more on making those responsible for carbon emissions pay more for remedial climate action. The bottom 50 percent of the population in Europe emits around five tonnes of carbon per person per year, with their counterpart class emitting three tonnes in East Asia and 10 tonnes in North America.

But the top 10 percent in these regions account for 29 tonnes in Europe, 39 tonnes in Asia and 73 tonnes in North America. Indeed, the top one percent in the US account for 269 tonnes of carbon per person per year, compared with 139 tonnes for the top one percent in China. The rich everywhere are the biggest carbon emitters.

All these suggest that tackling climate change and social injustice are part of a total political package, cutting across nations. It's one thing to promise to cut carbon to Net Zero, it's another to design the projects and programmes to deliver on their promises. Back home, each government will face huge resistance from vested interests that want to delay or just green-wash any action. In other words, talk more and do less.

The Report has made some excellent suggestions to tackle inequality, such as progressive tax measures and a global asset register, that are bound to be controversial. But to be effective, they need global cooperation. No single country can impose higher tax rates or tougher action without being undercut by another country.

Since everything is politics, I have to agree with inequality blogger Branko Milanovic that the recent Summit on Democracies is the wrong idea for the world, because it tried to divide the world into two opposing ideological camps. The priority should be to work together globally to tackle climate and human inequalities that require domestic action against vested interests that are common across nations.

The next Global Summit should be about how to tackle inequalities. Given the complex issues and facts raised by Piketty and his colleagues, the least we can do is to have a democratic, transparent and constructive dialogue on how those who can afford and emit more carbon should pay more taxes to foster a more sustainable and inclusive world.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/ | EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | Newsroom: Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | Advertisement: 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | Subscription: 01711623906