

Make Dhaka river authorities accountable

Continued pollution leading to public health and environmental crises

We're encouraged to see the head of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) making a bold statement against the mayor of Dhaka North and managing director of Dhaka Wasa for the dumping of untreated waste into rivers surrounding the capital. Reportedly, the NRCC chief even demanded that both be handed jail terms for their failure to prevent it. This may seem somewhat over the top, but there should be some form of accountability for those in charge of these vital institutions. It is because of the total lack of such accountability that Dhaka's rivers continue to be in dire straits, with unchecked pollution and encroachment robbing them of what little aquatic life they have.

During a discussion organised by the NRCC, it was revealed that sewage from drainage channels (including human waste) is flowing straight into the rivers. It is Dhaka Wasa's responsibility to treat human waste. However, it appears that waste from both storm sewer and sanitary sewer is landing directly in rivers, although the two systems should be kept separate. Storm sewer should go to rivers and sanitary sewer to treatment plants.

So, what happened to the projects undertaken to ensure their separation? Why is it that untreated human waste is ending up in our rivers? Why is Dhaka Wasa so lax in preventing water pollution? And why is it that despite the NRCC chief's insistence, Dhaka North has not set up nets at the mouths of canals so that waste does not fall into rivers? While we appreciate the NRCC chief's position on ensuring accountability for these failures, we also should take note of media reports putting the interconnected canals and rivers in Dhaka South within the same bracket. Why should the DSCC mayor not be held responsible for that? Even though he has, as per the NRCC chief, planned to build waste treatment plants at the mouths of canals, it is inexcusable that such a critical measure is stuck at the planning phase.

The government needs to deal with this fiasco with the utmost urgency. It seems that Dhaka Wasa continues to be embroiled in unending controversies, and its MD has repeatedly ended up at the centre of them. Unfortunately, when it comes to river protection and management, virtually all relevant institutions of the government have been found guilty of not doing enough. Besides the problem of untreated waste disposal polluting and choking our rivers, not just in Dhaka but across the country, a number of other challenges persist, including encroachment and lack of effective eviction and excavation. This paper's coverage of these issues on the World Rivers Day was quite illustrative in that regard.

Therefore, it is time for the government to hold all these institutions and their heads to account. In Dhaka, the Wasa chief and the mayors are clearly guilty of not doing enough. The government must take action against them.

Stop unnecessary foreign trips

Lawmaker's inclusion in an equipment inspection tour makes no sense

We are quite concerned at the way state officials, including ministers, members of the parliament and government high-ups, are going on non-mandatory foreign trips funded either by the government or, more dubiously, private firms implementing public projects. In the latest case, a lawmaker along with her personal assistant and two Roads and Highways Department engineers are said to be going to the US and Canada to "inspect" pothole repair and crack sealing machines to be shipped for a project. We wonder what the lawmaker, who is also chairman of a parliamentary committee on the road transport and bridges ministry, will do there since she apparently has no technical knowledge to inspect the items. And what purpose will her PA serve there?

Unfortunately, over the years, a culture has been created in the country where high-ranking government officials are offered foreign trips to inspect materials for various projects or for "training" purposes. These trips are often funded by different project implementing agencies. And in many cases, the people who are chosen for these trips are senior officials who are nearing retirement or have few years left of their service, and whose "training" is seldom put at the service of said projects or the country. The question is: Why organise such tours then? Is there some kind of underhand dealing behind these all-expenses-paid trips for people in decision-making positions? And how will soon-to-retire officials even utilise the knowledge gained from such trips?

Only recently, we showed in this column why this practice is nothing but a sheer waste of money, and is completely illogical and immoral. In July, the government placed restrictions on non-mandatory foreign tours of state officials considering the ongoing economic crisis. But showing complete disregard for that directive, officials from different government agencies have continued to go on such trips. For instance, several officials of the Chattogram Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (CWASA), including its managing director, went abroad recently as part of a project that had over 80 percent of its physical work already completed. Similar trips by the civil aviation authority, Wasa, and DAE officials have also been reported. And recently, the Dhaka Wasa MD has taken this practice to another level by including himself in a study tour while on leave.

From the nature of these trips and the background of officials selected for them, it won't be wrong to call them pleasure trips as the nation eventually gains close to nothing from these exercises. Coming back to the issue of the MP set to go abroad to inspect road repairing equipment, we think the visit is neither mandatory nor beneficial to the cause cited. Such trips should not be encouraged by the government at all.

How can we increase our remittance?



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Remittances sent by expatriate Bangladeshis are one of the vital sources of foreign currencies for the country's economy. Needless to say, remittance plays a crucial role at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, remittance improves the balance of payment position, helps pay import bills, builds foreign exchange reserves, helps debt servicing, and boosts economic growth – thereby promoting employment. At the micro level, remittance adds to household income back at home, helps improve the standard of living, reduces poverty, promotes savings and investment, and develops human capital through productive investment in education.

Seemingly, in recent months, the official aggregate inflow of remittance portrays a moderate uptrend in terms of both the US dollar and local currency, amid some fluctuations. It must be noted that remittance inflow is sensitive to external shocks. For example, around 60 percent is from temporary migrant workers in the oil-exporting Middle East countries. Ups and downs in crude oil prices in world markets exert positive and negative influences on the inflows, respectively. In the post-pandemic period, the number of temporary migrant workers has significantly increased, which is good for Bangladesh. During 2021-22, the number steeply rose to 877,371 (till May) from 280,258 in 2020-2021 – from 530,578 in 2019-20 and 692,978 in 2018-2019. The reasons include depreciation of the local currency and the government granting a 2.5 percent cash bonus to the recipients. Both measures are likely to motivate the expatriates to remit more money through the official channel.

Another remedial measure to further grow the number is to offer secured bank loans at reduced rates to potential temporary migrant workers to cover all travel-related costs. Notably, the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) has financed Tk 1,793 crore to 98,754 migrant workers as yet since its inception. Other banks also financed them to limited extents, but their role is expected to be scaled up. This way, people will not be forced to sell their properties at abnormally low prices and borrow from the informal market at exorbitant interest rates to go abroad to earn a living. This will save them from local loan sharks and real estate price manipulators. Such measures are imperative since the official inbound remittance makes enormous positive contributions to the economy of Bangladesh.

In contrast, remittance coming through unofficial channels such as hundi and other illegal means are not directly productive at the macro level. The volume of remittance coming through unofficial channels



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is anybody's guess. So, substantial amounts of key foreign currencies are available in the shadow market for illicit capital outflows and financing of illegal trading activities. Curtailing illegal capital inflows is imperative and should be an urgent policy concern.

The reasons for going through unofficial channels may be multiple: many temporary migrant workers live in remote areas of the labour-importing countries, with no access to banking services; a sizable number of them have no legal status, which deters them to remit through official channels; some may not have national ID (NID) cards; they may lack financial literacy; and time and travel costs may be high, among others. Hundi business operators take undue advantage of the above through their door-to-door or person-to-person informal and wide network.

In terms of some remedies, banks and exchange houses in host countries should have migrant workers install apps on their mobile phones, through which they can send money electronically as and when they want. Financial literacy of migrant manpower and familiarity with the benefits of mobile banking before going abroad are of utmost importance to scale up the inflow of remittance through the official channel. Teaching them how to open and operate bank accounts should be taken into consideration prior to sending them abroad. To this end, some sort of in-person and/or online training should be given due attention.

At the same time, they should be made aware of the potential pitfalls of illegal remitting. So, vocational training centres offering training to potential temporary migrants in urban and rural areas can include financial

literacy in their curriculum. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) can provide training on relevant financial issues before giving immigration clearance. Budding temporary immigrants may participate any time in this training well ahead of their travel. Banks and financial institutions may design more innovative deposit and investment products with

points.

Strengthening the diaspora communities would also help entice larger inflows of foreign currencies. These communities should be encouraged to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) as well as foreign portfolio investment (FPI). Direct investment opportunities exist in sectors like textiles, ICT,

financial and non-financial benefits to cater to the requirements and choices of the expatriates. In addition, networking with the temporary migrant workers abroad should be vastly widened to make obtaining NID cards easy for them. Illegal immigrants as well as businesspersons with more income than their allowed limit may be permitted to send money from the accounts of legal immigrants till their legal status is confirmed.

Migrant workers must be treated well at airports at home and must not be harassed when receiving due services inside and outside the country. In particular, they deserve more humane treatment from Bangladesh embassies and consular offices abroad. Exchange houses and correspondent banks in host countries should be more active in keeping touch with them on a regular basis. They must keep in mind that these hardworking people make the backbone of an aspiring Bangladeshi economy.

To state some of the current financial measures, the government together with Bangladesh Bank has created an opportunity for non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) to invest in various bonds. The Wage Earner's Development Bond (WEDB), US Dollar Premium Bond, and US Dollar Investment Bond are popular investment instruments for skilled and professional remitters living abroad. However, the prevailing cap on buying bonds up to Tk 1 crore, and limits on reinvestment opportunities are likely to demotivate them. In this regard, my opinion is that they may be allowed to invest more foreign currency in these secured bonds, if necessary, by reducing the interest/coupon rate by a few basis

light engineering, jute, leather, pharmaceuticals, ceramics, bicycle, and ship building. The ICT sector is a highly potential sector. IT experts among the NRBs may be motivated to invest in this sector. They have the opportunity for direct investment singularly or in joint ventures with their preferred local entrepreneurs.

FPI can also be a useful conduit for attracting investment from the diaspora communities. However, making investment safer, offering hassle-free services and adopting a one-stop investor centre would be conducive. Introduction of innovative equity and other financial products in the capital market like preferred shares, diaspora bonds, etc may be the need of the hour to attract investment from the NRBs. As an example, the exchange rate adjusted return in Bangladesh in dollar terms for NRBs in the US should be higher than the US return on investment, since the returns in two different currencies are not comparable.

It should be noted especially that the Bangladesh missions abroad might be required to play a major role to scale up remittance inflow by communicating all benefits and pertaining policies as well as technical support available for the diaspora communities. Arranging discussions, seminars and workshops by the missions from time to time will be beneficial in this respect. They must remember that traditional foreign diplomacy has now transformed into economic diplomacy.

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ICT in Bangladesh's primary education



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The government's much cherished "Vision 2021" is no more a fancy term. Rather, in 2022, digitisation has been a core part of most public service delivery systems. The main purpose of digitisation is not to enforce the use of digital equipment everywhere, but to ensure quick and efficient response for service recipients.

Digital technologies have been in use in elementary schools for some time now, but the government is planning to widen the area of implementation of ICT to include primary schools. To make the groundbreaking change successful, we need to assess the present scenario in schools as well as consider global demands.

One of the earlier successes in introducing digital technology to schools are multimedia classrooms. But what the students are seeing is just the tip of the iceberg compared to what

could potentially be in terms of a digital classroom.

Bangladesh is gearing up for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and the primary education system needs to make a lot of progress in order to match up to the standards of a developed nation. As we have observed the elementary education systems in developed countries, we have found that ICT is a core part of the teaching methods and curricula. So the question is: Are we ready for the same? Are our teachers, students, and management ready for the leap? The direct answer is: Not yet. But we have identified key areas to look into before digitising our primary education at full throttle. There are also some challenges that we will need to address over time.

Most of the primary school students in Bangladesh are yet to touch a computer with their own hands. On

the other hand, a child in a developed nation work with computers at school and at home as well. Thus, their experience of becoming familiar with technology is smoother.

The general IT knowledge of our teachers is below average at present. Although the usage of smartphones and high-speed internet is seeing a boom in the country, the use of internet

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and technologies are mostly limited to using social media and visiting news portals. As such, all teachers must be given enough training so they have the basic capacity to use computers and primary knowhow of IT.

As for the primary school students, they must be taught the basic uses of computer hardware and software. They can gain basic computer training using open source softwares that teach processes via interesting games. Special planning is needed for teaching mathematics and English using ICT, as these are two major subjects Bangladesh students struggle with.

Primary school children should be introduced to the wealth of educational materials available on the internet. In the modern world, even basic C programming is taught at the primary level. This can be done in Bangladesh as well, using software that does not require a lot of typing. A lot of Bangla content is also available for students to peruse.

All in all, two core issues need to be sorted out to effectively implement ICT in Bangladeshi primary education. Firstly, well-organised training needs to be imparted to primary school teachers. Secondly, there should be at least a small computer lab in each primary school. Currently, the government is taking initiatives to implement the above programmes as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We hope to see more welcome changes in this regard.