

Avert food crisis

Food security should be one of our top priorities

In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war and the global disruption of fuel and energy prices, there has been a lot of discussion on what happens next, and many international leaders have weighed in on the debate – some calling for conflict resolution, and many moving towards greater militarisation. In the midst of all the uncertainty, we applaud PM Sheikh Hasina for being a strong voice in representing the developing world's greatest concern: the impact of the war on global food supplies and the cost of food. And we wholeheartedly support her call to action to ensure that no country suffers from food shortage and famine, especially when such shortages are a result of conflict and not any actual scarcity of food resources.

This call to action has never been more urgent in the Bangladeshi context, where food inflation reached almost 10 percent in August – the highest since the fiscal year 2012-2013 – before dropping to nine percent in September. Despite the fact that we have made gains in food production and ensured greater availability of rice in recent years, it is still being sold at near-record high prices. People are lining up from the crack of dawn to buy rice and flour from OMS trucks at subsidised prices.

The situation is made even worse by the fact that the recovery from the loss of earning during the pandemic for people from low-income backgrounds has been painfully slow, meaning they are forced to spend less for food in order to pay for rent, utilities and healthcare. A recent WFP survey has found that around 68 percent of the population are struggling to buy food. In this context, we must take all possible measures to ensure the situation does not escalate into a full-blown food crisis or famine.

Immediate measures must be taken to stop the wastage of food, improve food storage facilities and transportation networks, and cultivate land for food production. In this, we can all play a role, but the relevant authorities must play the leading role in implementing the PM's directives. Far too many glaring discrepancies remain in this regard. For example, while the PM has asked that every bit of cultivable land is used for food production, the latest DAP for Dhaka allows for construction on the little agricultural land left on the city outskirts based on certain conditionalities. Such gaps between policy and action must be urgently plugged if the issue of food scarcity is to be dealt with effectively.

Why the failure in stopping dengue?

Govt must help hospitals accommodate rising cases

The spread of dengue infection across the country seems to be relentless, and authorities' still-lax attitude and lack of action is making things worse. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), at least 857 new dengue patients were hospitalised across the country in 24 hours till Monday morning, which is the highest number of daily recorded dengue cases in 2022 so far. At least 96 people have also succumbed to the disease, making this year's dengue death toll the third highest since the infection's first outbreak in 2000. On top of this, hospitals are also reporting of their struggle to accommodate the increasing number of patients. Some are even turning patients away, while ailing individuals have to find a place for themselves on hospital floors due to a lack of beds for dengue patients. Multiple exposure to dengue, late admission to hospitals and late diagnosis of the virus have been cited by experts as being the main reasons for increasing dengue deaths.

But why have our authorities failed to prevent such a dengue surge this year, too? Only back in 2019, a staggering 1,01,354 dengue cases were recorded, while the death toll was 179. Previously believed to be more dangerous every other year, dengue seems to have broken that trend as it had infected at least 20,000 and claimed 70+ lives by October 2021, as per DGHS data. Given this reality, and the fact that dengue has been amidst us since May at least, there can be no excuse for authorities to be so woefully unprepared this year.

Most disappointingly, as we have mentioned in previous weeks and as healthcare experts have pointed out, the authorities' response to this crisis remains subpar. Though the Dhaka city corporations are constantly reassuring us that drives for public awareness and prevention (by way of destroying Aedes larvae in risky spots) are being conducted, they are clearly inadequate. While the city corporations can enter known dengue patients' homes and eradicate Aedes larvae from there, they cannot go into fenced under-construction buildings, which are one of the primary breeding grounds of the Aedes mosquito, meaning that the number of mosquitoes (and thus of infections) continues to rise.

We urge city corporations, local governments, and health sector authorities to utilise every available resource and assist hospitals in treating all dengue patients. Surely the Covid-19 pandemic and the dengue wave of 2019 have taught our authorities the seriousness of such public health crises and why they must be dealt with both proactively and reactively.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save us from river erosion

On Friday, the chant "Save us from river erosion" echoed along the bank of Dharla River in Kurigram's Dhaniram village. There are several such villages that are vulnerable to river erosion. About 200 homesteads and 400 bighas of land in Patrakhata village were lost to river erosion. Our homes and farmland were swallowed by the river over four years – from 2017 to 2021. It is evident that the Water Development Board (WDB) is taking actions to stop river erosion, but they cannot restore what people have already lost. To avoid further loss, we need the right measure at the right time.

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How to make development projects more time and cost-effective



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In light of the recent debt crisis in Sri Lanka, there is a growing discussion on the funding of development projects. In the context of foreign financing, if one concern is that of debt burden, the other is related to the inefficiency in managing foreign funds. In Bangladesh's case, though the dependence on foreign loans to fund development projects has declined over time – a reflection of which can be seen in the reduced share of foreign funds in the government's deficit financing – as high as 37.8 percent of this fiscal year's Annual Development Plan is set to be financed by project aid. As for the debt burden on the economy, despite concerns, the "risk of external debt distress" of Bangladesh is "low," according to the IMF, with the external-debt-to-GDP ratio hovering around 19.8 percent in 2021. However, efficiency of the development projects is another matter altogether, with a

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growing concern especially in terms of implementation of the foreign-financed projects. It is argued that delay at different stages of implementation and a lack of sufficient quality control in particular are adding to both monetary and time costs. Such inefficiency may also create obstacles to get foreign loans in the future.

Though there are structural differences between foreign-funded and domestic-funded development projects, there remain certain common underlying factors that influence the inefficiencies of some of these projects. Broadly speaking, such factors are



VISUAL: STAR

primarily related to quality service delivery obstructed by bureaucratic complexities, inefficiencies at the project design and selection stages, and deficiencies in project implementation. Foreign donors in certain cases have raised concerns about the sluggishness and incompetence in the preparation as well as submission and approval of development project proposals. The ADB, in the process of committing a USD 20 billion loan for roads and railway projects, recently pointed out the delay in the bidding process resulting primarily from sluggishness in the appointment of a contractor, along with substandard documentation related to the bidding.

In this connection, we must keep in mind that, be it foreign-funded or domestically financed projects, the quality of project implementation strongly depends on the efficiency of the project manager/director. Incompetency of project directors, as well as replacement of project directors within the implementation period of a project, can cause delays. Besides,

programmes, are resulting in delays in completion, and as a consequence, the future beneficiaries are being deprived of the benefits of the projects. Time lags in project implementation puts pressure on the development budget as well, as such delays increase project expenses. Delayed projects and the added expenses may therefore divert resources away from crucial areas closely linked to our development priorities. In the case of foreign-financed projects, inefficiencies in project implementation can not only restrict future flow of funds, but may also lead to stricter conditionalities. Given the ongoing global economic crisis, any inefficiency from our side will limit our sources of funds with relatively flexible terms and conditions.

For effective implementation of development projects, finding out the root causes of inefficiencies should be the first step. The importance of regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) cannot be emphasised enough. Based on such M&E, preferably on a biannual basis, the underlying problems (if any)

greater care must be taken to prepare the relevant documents associated with project design. If required, concrete feasibility studies must be undertaken and the recommendations and suggestions of those studies should be considered during project implementation.

In the case of foreign loans, not only internal efficiency, but a careful assessment of the modalities of loans is also needed so that the most prudent choice is made in fund selection. In this regard, we must not miss the "low hanging fruits," that is, the opportunities of smaller funds with fewer conditionalities and relatively low interest payments. Finally, we must keep in mind that the credibility of development projects lies not on spending money and their completion within the stipulated time frame, but also on what that money has attained. Therefore, in addition to quantitative yardsticks, it is crucial that the projects are evaluated on the basis of the country's performance in accomplishing its development goals.

A new coalition to address loss and damage emerges



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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During the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland last year, developing countries put forward a proposal to create a Finance Facility for Loss and Damage (FFLD), which was not accepted by developed countries. Instead, they replaced it by setting up the Glasgow Dialogue on Finance for Loss and Damage, which would carry on for three years before it would have any outcome.

Needless to say, this was a great disappointment for all the developing countries attending COP26.

However, one important development that did happen in Glasgow outside the main COP event was the setting up of a new loss and damage fund by the First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, who challenged others to match her contribution. Since then, the government of the province of Wallonia in Belgium has promised funds, as have several philanthropic foundations. More recently, Denmark was the first party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to have allocated funds specifically for addressing loss and damage caused by climate change.

At the same time, the finance ministers of the member-states of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), who



SOURCE: GREENPEACE

are known as the V20, also created a loss and damage funding window in their own multi-donor fund.

Earlier this month, the Government of Scotland invited representatives from all the governments and organisations who have stepped up to address loss and damage on the ground for a two-day conference in Edinburgh, together with the high-level champions of the UNFCCC whose role is to engage with non-state actors on the platform's behalf.

I was invited to speak with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at the opening session of the conference,

where she reiterated her three principles for funding loss and damage: first, the funds must be new and additional; second, the funds should be provided as grants and not as loans; and third, they must be explicitly allocated to address loss and damage from human-induced climate change.

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adopted, then it will signal a failure of COP27 before it even starts officially.

However, assuming that the agenda item is not blocked, the negotiations can proceed with a view to having a decision at the end of COP27 to establish an FFLD by COP28, to be held in Abu Dhabi next year. Such a result will indicate genuine progress at COP27.

At the same time, as last year's conference was held in Edinburgh, there was another important meeting of the V20 and G7 finance ministers in Washington, DC on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, where the two groups of finance ministers also agreed to address loss and damage from climate change. The details of how this will be achieved in practice still remain to be explained, but it is indeed a good development.

The upcoming COP27 may be the 27th climate conference, but it will be the first such event in the new era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change. This summit of global leaders must rise to the occasion and genuinely address the reality of losses and damages happening because of human-induced climate change all around the world.