The Daily Star
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Kurigram chars need high schools

Lifting this district out of poverty is not possible without higher education

With 70.8 percent of its population poor and 53.2 percent extremely poor, Kurigram is inarguably the face of poverty in Bangladesh. This district that is often in the news for sufferings caused by repeated flooding, riverbank erosion, and lack of work has been a rude reality check on Bangladesh's vaunted development success. In addition, a large segment of its population is either illiterate or deprived of the opportunity to get into formal education. That being the case, we wonder, how can the government lift this district out of poverty?

As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, the situation is particularly dire in the char areas with little access to secondary education. About 16 rivers, big and small, flow through Kurigram, connecting over 400 chars – where about 5 lakh people of the district's 24 lakh population live. For this routinely battered and displaced community largely cut off from the mainland, there are only five high schools. Five for five lakh – a stark contrast to the government policy of allowing for a school at a distance of every three kilometres. Even if we include primary schools – about 169, according to the district primary education office – and madrasas, it doesn't come close to the number required.

As a result, most char students cannot go beyond primary education. Boys end up in manual labour (farming/etc.) and girls in early marriage. For the girls, "drop-out", so often the cause of early marriage in other districts, is not a word you would associate with them as there is hardly any secondary or lower secondary school to drop *out* of. It presents them with an insurmountable challenge with far-reaching consequences. Reportedly, the few students that can manage to attend high schools have to do so by covering long distances, meaning extra costs, extra pressure (because of security and other concerns), and extra time spent in commuting (by boats).

It is, therefore, vital that the government takes urgent steps to improve access to education in these char areas. Experts say that, given the present reality, one primary school in every char and one high school for several nearby chars are essential. There should also be supporting infrastructure and conditions, including improved communications for commuting students, improved security for girl students, more stipends and education benefits, MPO status for schools, providing better incentives to encourage households, and raising awareness of the vital role that higher education can play in eradicating poverty.

Char areas face some unique development challenges that may always remain, including the erratic weather and their vulnerability to rivers. But we need to give students the opportunity to dream big and explore their full potential. With the skills and aspirations thus acquired, they can do what the government's short-term employment/skills programmes cannot: elevate the socioeconomic status of this perennially poor region and better adapt to their vulnerabilities. Also, the lack of policy focus on the development of the district in general must be reversed.

Another river on its death bed

By killing our rivers, we only hasten our downfall

We're quite disturbed by the news of yet another river, Mayur in Khulna, being killed by indiscriminate dumping of waste and encroachment – the usual suspects. It's like an unstoppable cycle that keeps repeating with one river after another being left lifeless by the apathy and callousness of people. Add to that the insatiable appetite for land grabbing and you have a formula for this unfathomable "rivercide".

It is unfathomable because we know just how precious rivers are, being the lifelines for communities that live near them and for the country as a whole. Even the High Court has recognised the value of our rivers, declaring them as "living entities" and instructing the state to protect them as such. There have been attempts to remove encroachers through making lists as well as launching cleaning operations, but eventually, everything is undone, and the rivers continue to face onslaughts as before.

In the case of Mayur River, which is the main source of fresh water for the two-lakh people living in adjacent areas, around 26 drains pour most of Khulna city's waste into it. Water hyacinth, which reduces oxygen levels for fish and creates the ideal habitat for disease-carrying mosquitoes, has also invaded the water. Meanwhile, the sluice gate built to protect agricultural land from salinity and tidal surges has become virtually useless. Pollution is killing aquatic life, affecting the livelihoods of fishermen and farmers.

The eventual death of the Mayur was a forgone conclusion. But have the authorities done anything at all to stop this? In 2019, a list of illegal land grabbers was made by a technical committee, containing the names of 470 individuals and organisations responsible for constructing 362 establishments. It is now 2022, but the river-land grabbers have not gone away. Why is that? In addition, excavation projects costing crores of taka have amounted to nothing because the city corporation allegedly did not conduct a proper survey or technical analysis before the work.

This is a story that repeats itself with most of the rivers that are either dead or on the verge of death. Buriganga, Teesta, Dhaleshwari, Shitalakhya, Balu, Karatoya, Turag – the list of dead or dying rivers seems endless. And we are quite aware by now about what needs to be done to save the rivers. This paper has continuously campaigned for the protection of rivers over the decades, but little heed has been paid to these appeals. We need political commitment, proper enforcement of the laws, empowerment of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) and upholding of the High Court's directives that demonstrate the crucial role of rivers. In all this, the most urgent is political commitment, which is needed to make other measures successful. We urge the authorities to take urgent steps to save our rivers.

From rhetoric to realisation of climate actions at COP27

MACRO MIRROR

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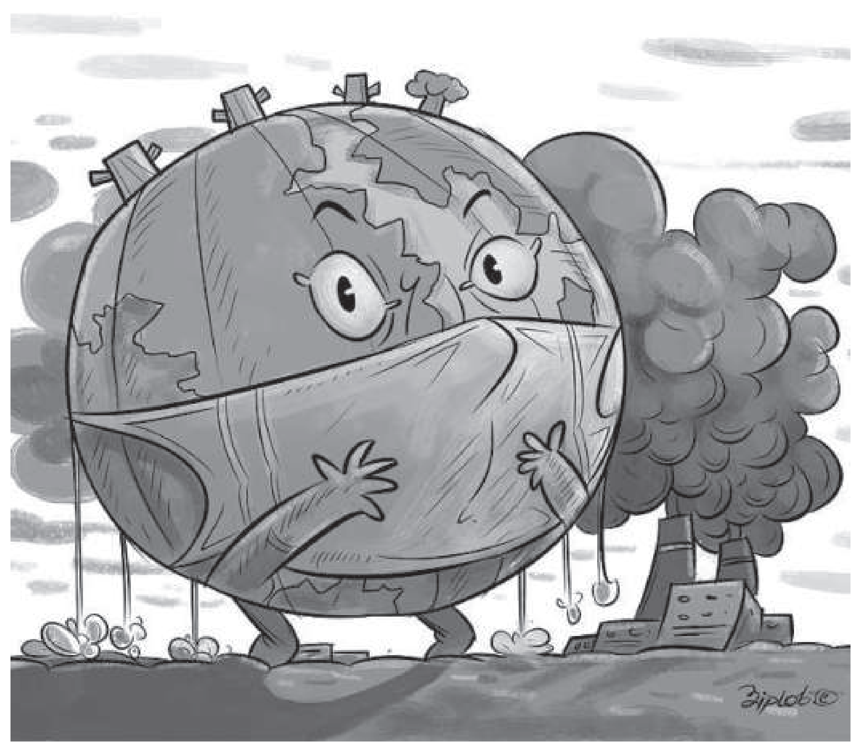
FAHMIDA KHATUN

The two-week 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) began in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt yesterday. The context of this COP is quite different from the last one, with COP27 being overshadowed by extreme global financial and geopolitical crises. Inflationary pressure and food and fuel crises have hit all countries – so much so that some advanced countries are deviating from their climate commitments. Against this backdrop, the COP27 presidency of Egypt envisions "to move from negotiations and planning to implementation." Indeed, accelerated actions are needed for urgent issues such as mitigation, adaptation, finance, and climate justice for loss and damage.

A key expectation in Sharm el-Sheikh is to have a stronger commitment from nations to reduce their emissions to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius. The 2015 Paris Agreement set the ambition to keep global warming below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, but preferably limiting it to 1.5 degrees. The 2022 report of World Resource Institute (WRI 2022) on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for emission reduction indicates that even though countries are implementing the Paris Agreement, the pace and scale of emission reduction must be enhanced to achieve the global climate ambition. Despite their low emission levels, the climate-vulnerable least developed and developing countries have also made mitigation commitments in their NDCs.



VISUAL: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

The adaptation issue received more attention at COP26 than before. The comprehensive two-year Glasgow-Sharm-el-Sheikh work programme on the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) was launched at COP26. The work programme aims to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change. It was mentioned that countries would devise methodologies to assess progress on adaptation goals. COP27 will be an opportunity to take stock on such progress.

An important outcome of COP26 was developed countries committing to double their adaptation funding by 2025. This is because climate change has created insurmountable challenges for the least developed and developing countries. According to the Global Climate Risk Index (GCRI) 2021, the 10 most affected countries from 2000 to 2019 (annual averages) are least developed and developing countries – including Bangladesh. The report further informs that in 2019, storms and their direct implications such as rain, floods and landslides were a major cause for loss and damage. The GCRI 2021 report also reveals that among the 10 most climate-affected countries in 2019, six were hit by tropical cyclones. It is understood that with higher temperatures, occurrences of severe tropical cyclones will increase.

To reduce climate vulnerabilities and shocks and adapt to the rapidly changing environment, low- and lower-middle-income countries require financial resources. An adaptation fund is needed to build and strengthen resilience so that climate-vulnerable countries can continue their economic activities. Such a fund is required for enhancing their early warning systems for natural disasters. As the majority of low-income countries rely on agriculture, there is a need for technology for the farmers to receive better and updated data on weather and markets.

Back in 2009, at COP15 in Copenhagen, developed countries committed to collectively mobilise an amount of USD 100 billion every year by 2020 for the developing countries to undertake climate actions. The annual commitment target of USD 100 billion was extended to 2025 at COP21 in Paris. Unfortunately, that target has not yet been reached. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the total climate finance provided and mobilised by developed countries amounted to USD 83.3 billion in 2020. Of this fund, 58 percent was for mitigation, 34 percent for adaptation, and seven percent for cross-cutting activities. Though adaptation finance grew the most in 2016-2020, mitigation finance has been the highest on average during this period. Therefore, how developed countries will meet the USD 100 billion target and how climate finance will be arranged post-2025 are urgent issues for least developed and developing countries.

Despite demands from climate-change-affected countries for several years, the issue of loss and damage has been contentious at the global forum. It is feared that a few countries will face irreversible losses and damages due to climate change, which are not only economic in nature, but also social and cultural. People will lose their homes, economic opportunities, agricultural and industrial production, tourism, and other services; some of these cannot be valued in monetary terms alone.

There was some progress in the discussion of loss and damage at COP26. The Glasgow Pact calls for action to avert, minimise and address loss and damage. At COP25 in Madrid, the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage was established while at COP26, countries agreed to operationalise and fund the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage. There have also been commitments to finance from the governments of Scotland, Denmark, and the Wallonia region of Belgium, as well as a few philanthropies such as the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the European Climate Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, and the Global Green Grants Fund. However, such a financial mechanism should be a part of the agreement at COP27.

Overall, COP27's success will be defined by stronger mitigation commitments, further action on adaptation, enhanced flow of climate finance for both mitigation and adaptation measures, and a higher focus on the issue of climate justice by paying for loss and damage to the climate-vulnerable countries.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The case for structural financial deglobalisation

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ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

The US Federal Reserve's aggressive monetary-tightening campaign has squeezed economies worldwide, particularly in the developing world. With the dollar appreciating sharply against their currencies, many emerging and developing economies have experienced rapid increases in borrowing costs and consumer prices, leaving local policymakers with little choice but to raise interest rates and imperil their fragile economic recovery.

In the face of surging inflation, some lower-income countries have pushed back against the dollar's hegemony. But instead of complaining, policymakers should consider insulating their economies from the greenback by erecting barriers to cross-border capital flows. To mitigate the effects of adverse monetary-policy spillovers, the world needs a bout of structural financial deglobalisation.

When the Fed launched its quantitative-easing programme in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, it was accused of encouraging speculative capital flows to emerging and developing economies and fuelling dangerous asset bubbles. Now that it is raising interest rates to fight surging prices at home, critics blame it for exporting inflation and financial instability by attracting capital back to the United States. In both cases, the US has been criticised as acting out of pure self-interest, even if that means forcing other countries to adopt beggar-thy-neighbour policies.

The Fed is therefore damned if it eases monetary policy and damned if it tightens it. But the uncomfortable truth is that countries around the world chose to open their economies to capital flows and expose themselves not just to US monetary policy, but to fickle foreign finance and the institutions that control it. By handing over power, and often on behalf of elite domestic interests, they willingly made themselves vulnerable.

Attempting to minimise the costs of their Faustian bargain, emerging-economy policymakers have pinned their hopes on international coordination of monetary policy. Some have pleaded with the US to stop acting like a hegemon and consider the impact of its decisions on other countries, trying in vain to convince their American counterparts that doing so would be in America's enlightened self-interest.

But those hoping for monetary-policy coordination seem to be disregarding the lessons of Covid-19. Even as scientists warned that the only way to end the pandemic was to ensure that most of the world's population was vaccinated, the US and other wealthy countries rejected global cooperation and instead hoarded vaccine doses. The result was vaccine apartheid, and poorer countries had to scramble to secure supplies.

Moreover, seeking global coordination seems like a fool's errand at a time when the world is turning away from multilateralism. The international trading system has been in intensive care for decades – not least owing to US trade barriers – while the escalating Sino-American rivalry could herald an era marked by economic fragmentation and geopolitical conflict. At the same time, America's domestic political polarisation means that a new administration could reverse any US commitment.

Emerging and developing economies need to shed their illusions about global cooperation. Instead, policymakers should regain agency and control by reverting to the relatively limited capital mobility that characterised the Bretton Woods era.

What, then, is the alternative to the dollar's hegemony? Emerging-market policymakers must resist the lure of financial globalisation. Several studies, including one by Harvard's Dani Rodrik and me, have shown that cross-border flows of private financial capital do not foster sustained economic growth. The substantive benefits from financial globalisation, if any, are too few to offset the costs of sudden shocks, capital flight, and loss of policy control. As bad as China's policies have become under President Xi Jinping, China is one of the few countries still able to use domestic policy to cushion against the current financial turmoil.

Emerging and developing economies need to give up their victimhood narrative and shed their illusions about global cooperation. Instead, policymakers should regain agency and control by reverting to the relatively limited capital mobility that characterised the Bretton Woods era.

This would require going beyond the half-hearted measures the International Monetary Fund (IMF) proposed to mitigate the risks of temporary capital-inflow surges. Developing and emerging-market countries must impose constraints on the cross-border flow of certain forms of capital, particularly volatile portfolio flows. Only "good capital" – for example, foreign direct investment that has a long-term stake in the recipient country and brings technology, skills, and ideas to it – should enjoy the right to move across borders.

The usual response to such proposals is that the genie of international finance cannot be put back in the bottle. But emerging economies can, in fact, restrict capital flows (albeit imperfectly and impermanently). It is up to local policymakers to decide, whereas cooperation to minimise the impact of dollar hegemony is controlled by the US. It is hypocritical to embrace financial globalisation and then rail against it when it does not work for you.

More broadly, the world seems to have forgotten that excessive financialisation is responsible for some of the worst economic crises in the last four decades. Capitalism must be saved from its financial rentiers, and financial deglobalisation is a good place to start. As the British economist and Bretton Woods architect John Maynard Keynes once said, while ideas, knowledge, and science are international by definition, finance should be "primarily national." It's time we heeded his advice.

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