

The Daily Star

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Can we live healthy if our soil doesn't?

Land degradation is posing a threat to our food security, environment

On World Soil Day 2022, The Daily Star published a report based on the findings of a study that should set all alarm bells ringing. The study reveals a staggering scale of soil degradation in Bangladesh, with around 11.07 million hectares of land – accounting for 75 percent of its geographical area – estimated to be suffering nutrient depletion. Of them, 1.47 million hectares have suffered “severe” soil nutrient depletion, meaning that the land has lost 50 to 75 percent of its productivity, and will be very difficult to use for further cultivation. We get further insights as the study, conducted by scientists of the state-run Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI), delves into factors causing the decline in soil quality.

For a nation exposed to a daily diet of disturbing statistics, this one may seem insignificant. But to anyone concerned about our long-term food security, it really is not. Soil degradation is considered among the most critical problems facing our world, particularly because of the threat it poses to food security, sustainability and health. A major contributor to this, in Bangladesh as in other countries, is acidification which, as per the SRDI study, has affected 54.8 percent of our land. Among other contributors are arsenic contamination, hill erosion, drought and riverbank erosion.

All these factors, together with the unchecked removal of topsoil, are reducing the ability of our land to support plant life and grow crops. Another big loss is that of vitamins and nutrients in food. Globally, it is estimated that two billion people suffer from a lack of micronutrients, known as “hidden hunger” because it is difficult to detect. What this means is that soil degradation may be a bigger challenge than we think. Yet, bizarrely, it continues to be a non-issue in our policy circles.

Everywhere you look, you see some kind of soil degradation at play – unplanned urbanisation and industrialisation, industrial effluents discharged into waterbodies, excessive use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, etc. A comment from one of the SRDI researchers is quite revealing. He said: “In the 1960s, there was a scarcity of only one nutrient in our soil – nitrogen. We handled the situation by applying urea. After 2010, it was found that almost all the nutrients in our soil have been decreasing at an alarming rate due to land degradation.” We can't let this happen anymore.

True, the growing demand for food has led to the growing use of pesticides and fertilisers. But we must create a balance here, and find more innovative and environmentally-friendly means of food production. Unfortunately, there is no dearth of research on soil but there is hardly any measure to prevent soil degradation or check depletion of agricultural land. The SRDI has guidelines for land and soil use, but we are yet to have a comprehensive national land use policy. We, therefore, urge the government to adopt one soon. It should also encourage sustainable land management practices, such as rainwater harvesting, sand dune reclamation, management of soil organic matters, and urban forestry to reduce further land degradation.

Govt must check endless road crashes

Will there be no accountability for the deaths and injuries from crashes?

Road traffic deaths and injuries in Bangladesh have turned into a silent epidemic over the last few years. According to the Bangladesh Road Safety Foundation (RSF), at least 6,284 people died and 7,468 others were injured in road crashes in 2021, compared to 5,431 dead and 7,379 injured in 2020. This year has been no different, with the RSF counting at least 554 deaths and 747 injuries in November alone. What's worse, 71 of the deceased were children.

One major contributor to the November death toll was motorbike accidents, in which 229 people lost their lives, accounting for 41.33 percent of the total deaths. This is particularly noteworthy because the rise in the number of motorbikes plying our roads has been linked to a rise in crashes in recent years. Because motorbikes are more susceptible to crashes, due to the lack of safety measures compared to bigger vehicles, it is terrifying to imagine how many more lives will be lost or scarred for life unless measures are taken to reverse the trend.

Some of the major reasons behind the increasing number of accidents include reckless driving, over-speeding, ignoring traffic laws, illegal and dangerous competition among bus companies, drivers being under the influence of drugs and alcohol, hazardous roads, and an ineffective traffic management system. The apathy of the authorities in addressing the scourge of road accidents is another major factor plaguing our road sector. Following the 2018 student movement for road safety, the authorities had made some promises to resolve these issues. However, as things panned out, those promises proved to be hollow. Even the much-hyped Road Transport Act 2018 – which has largely been neutered by the lobbying power of transport owners – continues to be stuck in limbo.

For comparison, we can look at the history of traffic accidents in China, another populous country. During the 1980s and 1990s, China invested significantly into researching the causes of its road accidents, which ultimately resulted in its first road traffic safety law in 2003. Over time, the number of serious traffic accidents (those resulting in death or disability) reduced from 49 per year on average before 2008 to just two in 2019.

The government of Bangladesh should invest in conducting similar research on the rising rate of traffic accidents, and strictly implement the road traffic act. The responsibility for the horrifying scenario that currently prevails on our roads falls squarely on the shoulders of the ministry of road transport and bridges, and the agencies that it commands, who must answer for their consistent failure. Without holding them responsible for the apathy they have shown to public safety over the years, it is extremely difficult to envision how some form of discipline can be installed on our roads and highways, and subsequently, how deaths and injuries from road accidents can be lowered.

DEMOCRACY DAY

Three decades of backsliding from pledges for democracy



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KAMAL AHMED

Thirty-two years have gone by since our national leaders made a pledge to make Bangladesh a democracy where the fundamental rights of the people would be protected, and the judiciary's independence and neutrality and the rule of law would be guaranteed. Laws contrary to fundamental rights would be scrapped. Their core pledge was to establish a sovereign parliament elected through a free and fair election.

These commitments were made in the Joint Declaration of three alliances on November 19, 1990, demanding the end of military ruler Gen HM Ershad's dictatorial regime and handover of power to a neutral caretaker government. This national accord among all major political parties forced Ershad to hand power over to the nominee of the opposition parties, the then Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. High hopes and expectations dominated our national psyche for the first few years, but it didn't take long for our politicians to start backsliding on the promises they had made.

The gradual backsliding has now taken us to a state where global think tanks describe us as an elected autocracy. Sweden's Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is one such institution of global repute that produces the largest global dataset on democracy, with over 30 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 to 2021. V-Dem, in its Democracy Report 2022 titled “Autocratization Changing Nature?”, names Bangladesh among 33 nations where substantial autocratisation has happened. Noting the fact that electoral autocracy remains the most common regime type in the world, present in 60 countries, it says, “The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to (the) 1989 levels – the last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated.”

In Bangladesh, too, much of the gains in democratic and civic rights made in the first half of the 90s, following the deposition of the military dictator, have been eradicated. Apart from losing rights and opportunities to vote freely, erosion in the freedoms of expression and assembly have made most people powerless and voiceless. If



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PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRK/MAJORITY WORLD

we go by the latest census, more than half of our population is under 30 years old (26 percent under 14, and 25 percent between 15-29 years), which means they have probably never gotten a chance to vote freely to elect their representatives. As the voting age in Bangladesh is 18, today's 30-year-olds were unable to vote in 2008.

It is probably quite easy for our national leaders to ignore the pledges they made, as half of our population who were not even born then are not aware of the details of the Joint Declaration of 1990 by the three alliances. The scant history or the lone fact that reached them through partisan narrations was that a national movement had brought an end to a military dictatorship, but they are unlikely to know of the pledges of establishing independent judiciary and rule of law, protecting fundamental rights as enshrined in our constitution, and ensuring people's representation through free and fair voting.

not condone communalism and will collectively resist communal propaganda.” They made an unambiguous commitment “to avoid conflict altogether in the electoral process and ensure that the voters can exercise their right to vote freely, and that peace and order is maintained in the polling booths.”

Those pledges are nothing extraordinary or unique, and are essential elements in most democracies. But, due to our bitter past, those commitments were seen as a great achievement at that time. Three decades of political history, however, has proven that they were empty promises made by power-hungry politicians and were never meant to be followed through.

Both the Awami League and the BNP have reneged on those promises, but blame each other for betrayal and being anti-democratic. Both have resorted to violence against the opponent, tried to suppress criticism,

opportunity instead of an inalienable constitutional right. The right to assembly for the opposition has now become conditional – with not one or two, but 26 provisos, as laid out by Dhaka Metropolitan Police while granting permission to BNP to hold their rally on December 10.

Last week, I wrote in this newspaper that the government should refrain from seeking transnational repression of its critics abroad. But, a day after, our high commission in Canada posted an announcement on its official letterhead bearing the government insignia, declaring that it would no longer provide consular services to those who were engaged in alleged “anti-state activities and propaganda.” There are plenty of tools available to the government to counter any falsehood, but terming anti-government statements and opinions as anti-national is simply wrong and misguided. These are the acts that are bound to make Bangladesh lose its identity as a democracy.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Napoleons of Big Tech



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BILL EMMOTT

Companies have long had to manage “key person risk,” even taking out insurance against the possibility of losing top executives through death, illness or injury. But the collapse of the crypto exchange FTX, Meta's plummeting share price, and the chaos at Twitter following its takeover by Elon Musk suggest that “key people” can pose a very different kind of danger. Call it “Napoleonic founder” risk. Perhaps investors and lenders should be demanding a premium to cover the risk that a star entrepreneur will one day become an egomaniacal dictator, burning money along the way.

The risk is not new, of course. Business history is full of executives going rogue with corporate funds, and of successful entrepreneurs failing to realise that mature, publicly traded companies are not their personal playthings. But with each business cycle, it seems, old lessons must be relevant.

Following the dot-com crash at the turn of this century, the storied American investor Warren Buffett famously quipped that “you only find out who is swimming naked when the tide goes out.” Such is the modern business cycle: it flows eternally from optimism to pessimism, and from boom to bust. Yet, Buffett might have added that the optimistic high tides

are the moments when precautions must be put in place. Once you have been confronted with the naked truth, your money may already have been lost.

This was certainly true in the case of Sam Bankman-Fried and FTX, which was valued at as much as USD 32 billion earlier this year. Few will sympathise with those who have lost money from the company's collapse. Notwithstanding Bankman-Fried's pretence of offering a mature version of crypto, everyone involved should have known it was a casino. And anyone who was paying attention to Bankman-Fried's extravagant lifestyle should have seen that he was no Buffett.

To be sure, it is difficult for investors to take precautions against such buccaneers. Those who back a company like FTX are looking for high-risk bets with the potential for massive rewards. Still, the smart investor ought to be able to detect signs that a buccaneer is becoming something closer to a pirate. With Bankman-Fried, the clues were everywhere: he was running the company with a few close friends from a penthouse in the Bahamas.

Since investment is all about making bets on an unknowable future, confidence, trust, and salesmanship are

a big part of the game. While investors are nominally backing business plans, their belief in that plan often depends on their belief in a person.

A diversified portfolio is the main defence against losses from fraud or delusional thinking. The entire venture-capital industry rests on the idea that if you bet on enough ambitious start-ups, the gains from the rare success stories will far outweigh the losses from all the duds and rogues. During the long era of ultra-cheap capital – combined with the potentially global markets available to technology firms – the sales pitches became more seductive, and the bets much larger. But the basic principles have always been the same.

With battle-hardened superstar entrepreneurs like Meta's Mark Zuckerberg or Twitter's Elon Musk, the issue is more complex. Having proven themselves over the past two decades, they are now more like veteran CEOs than start-up founders. Yet, it is worth remembering that Napoleon Bonaparte also was a political and military veteran when he launched his disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812.

As success builds on success, and as the billions accumulate and the empires grow larger, two things happen. First, the business – or, in Musk's case, the business empire – becomes so large and complex that it needs professional managers, formal structures, and plenty of checks and balances. But, second, those who build multi-billion-dollar companies from the ground up often come to exhibit a sense of entitlement and impunity, behaving as though all this scaffolding merely obstructed their vision.

The many years of cheap capital – a seemingly permanent high tide – obscured this tendency. The good

times went on for so long that many investors forgot the basics, while politicians, happy to see job creation and growth in new industries, became far too indulgent towards tech billionaires, who often became major sources of campaign donations.

Meta is a case in point. Anyone holding the company's stock should have recognised the risks associated with the company's dual-class share structure. Although Zuckerberg holds only 13 percent of all shares, he owns around 55 percent of voting shares, and thus enjoys carte blanche in the company's decision-making.

In the good times, this structure – shared by other tech firms, such as Alphabet (Google) – may have seemed to make sense. But with Meta's share price having fallen by three quarters over the past year, and with Zuckerberg betting the company by investing billions in creating a virtual-reality experience (the Metaverse), investors are up in arms, even though they have only themselves to blame.

Will Musk – or his lenders and investors – heed this lesson? Musk's behaviour at Twitter so far suggests that everyone involved is in for a costly education. He has already sacked half the company's staff, possibly breaking employment laws in the process. He now must come up with a way to make Twitter profitable enough to justify the USD 44 billion purchase price. That is a tall order. While the overall attention paid to Twitter may have increased, many top advertisers – the platform's main revenue source – have already suspended their campaigns.

Napoleon fought more battles after his retreat from Moscow, some with great skill, but his reputation for invincibility never recovered. No one can unsee a naked emperor.