



It seems grossly inappropriate that in a country which has spent millions of its own funds in mega infrastructure projects, there are still people who are, essentially, dying from poverty.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

The cold doesn't kill people. Bad policies do.



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SHUPROVA TASNEEM

One of my core memories as a child was of visiting my hometown in North Bengal, where my father would take me out onto a street and point to a space on the horizon. That was where, as a little boy, he had sometimes caught sight of the outline of the Kanchenjunga mountain on a clear day, and his grandmother swore that back when she was young, it was fully visible on winter mornings.

I'm still unsure if I had actually seen that famous outline or if my childhood mind had imagined it, but I can tell you for certain that it's no longer there – winter fog, building development, air pollution, and rising temperatures mean that sight is lost forever.

In fact, despite the mild cold wave the country has already experienced this winter, the truth is that temperatures in Bangladesh have steadily been rising due to the climate crisis. The fallout from this has been researched extensively, and vulnerable populations have already started to feel its impacts in the form of erratic rainfall, sudden floods, tidal surges, more regular cyclone cycles, increased water salinity, extreme temperatures, and more.

Be that as it may, it also cannot be denied that people have faced hardships this winter. This daily has printed some heartrending images of homeless people trying to fight the cold on the streets of Dhaka, with one person even curling up inside a sack in a desperate attempt to stay warm. We heard of how people lit fires to warm themselves and ended up with burn injuries, and how children crowded hospitals with winter-related diseases like pneumonia.

This is not exactly a new phenomenon. A joint research paper from Calgary University and KUET found that, every year, an average of 104 people die from cold and cold-related diseases in Bangladesh. The worst winter was that of 2011-2012, which saw 214 deaths, while the “best” was in 2016-2017, where only 18 people died. Unfortunately, the numbers rose again in 2020-21 with 52 deaths, the majority of which occurred in districts in Rangpur and Barishal divisions. And while we cannot yet ascertain this season's impacts, there have been multiple reports of similar cold-related deaths as well.

It seems grossly inappropriate that in a country on its way to achieving middle-income status, and which has spent millions of its own funds in mega infrastructure projects, there are still people who are, essentially, dying from poverty. The majority of people who die from cold-related issues are either homeless or can't afford to repair their homes for winter, and sometimes cannot even afford a blanket or shawl to protect

themselves at night. The rising costs of healthcare also exclude the poor from getting proper treatment for cold-related illnesses.

Even after a few decades of development, and especially given the fact that the temperatures experienced are not unusual events, why are we still failing to support vulnerable populations during winter? While every year we see programmes to distribute warm blankets, both from the government and community organisations, what is concerning is the lack of long-term solutions with regard to shelter and healthcare.

This is all the more worrying when you consider that Bangladesh is facing complex

In the National Adaptation Plan, it is heartening to see that the first goal is to ensure protection against climate change variability – and that extreme temperatures, including cold, are included among the climate risks we need to prepare for. The NAP also focuses on climate-resilient agriculture, climate-smart cities, and conservation and biodiversity. But we can no longer be satisfied with ambitious long-term plans and policies that run the risk of being confined to the paper they have been put down on.

and interconnected climate-related worries that can be intensified during certain seasons, but which cannot be dealt with on a “when we have to” basis.

Take, for example, our struggle with air quality during winters. In December 2022, Dhaka's air quality was worse than that of New Delhi's on two separate occasions. Winter smog has now become a common occurrence in South Asia – usually made up of a toxic concoction of vehicle exhaust, smoke from brick kilns, dust particles from construction sites, etc. Indoor pollution is

also exacerbated in winter, since the colder and drier air traps more harmful particles.

According to World Bank estimates, air pollution kills around 80,000 people a year in Bangladesh. In 2019, it was the second largest cause of deaths and disabilities in Bangladesh. Yet, there has been very little effort to seriously tackle the issue. While the Kathmandu Roadmap for improving air quality in the Indo-Gangetic Plain and Himalayan Foothills – which was drawn up last month in a meeting of delegates from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Pakistan – is a step in the right direction, only time will tell how serious the countries are about translating policy into action.

One study found that living in houses made of corrugated tin, especially on roofs, can drive temperatures up by as much as 12 degrees Celsius, since the material traps heat during the day. But when it's cold, tin has the opposite effect, acting as a poor insulator. This may explain why, despite the fact that cold waves have not visibly worsened, many vulnerable people in the country are less equipped to handle them than before.

At COP27, Bangladesh stressed on its need for USD 230 billion over the next 27 years to enhance adaptation capacity. In the National Adaptation Plan, it is heartening to see that the first goal is to ensure protection against climate change variability – and that extreme temperatures, including cold, are included among the climate risks we need to prepare for. The NAP also focuses on climate-resilient agriculture, climate-smart cities, and conservation and biodiversity.

But just how long will these steps take to become reality? Certain districts are already in the grips of another mild cold wave, and we will have to accept that erratic climates are now the new norm.

Are there initiatives being implemented right now to protect the most vulnerable members of society? Will there be more Ashrayan projects for the homeless – ones that actually deal with the (literal) cracks in the initiative? Will the capacity of local hospitals to deal with seasonal diseases increase? Will energy prices be affordable enough for people to accommodate seasonal needs? Will steps be taken against the country's worst polluters?

We can no longer be satisfied with ambitious long-term plans and policies that run the risk of being confined to the paper they have been put down on. On one hand, Bangladesh is known to be a climate leader. On the other, hill-cutting, land-grabbing and environmental destruction continue unabated, and there seems to be very little awareness of the far-reaching impacts such actions can have, whether on soil erosion, winter pollution or heat stress.

If the authorities can allow hotels to be built on Indigenous land, if water bodies can be choked by pollution from plastic factories and tanneries, and if even government bodies can plan to cut down trees in reserve forests to build roads – is it any surprise we need some reassurance about their intention to deal with seasonal climate issues that ultimately impact vulnerable populations the most?

Isn't it time we stopped running after the GSP?



RMG NOTES
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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

For decades, Bangladesh has benefitted from preferential trading arrangements with the European Union (EU) through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP). The GSP provides trade “sweeteners” on international trade to developing and low-income economies. For apparel exports, this means that Bangladeshi-made garments can enter the EU market duty and quota-free, offering our manufacturers a significant cost advantage and ensuring that our exports are highly competitive.

The GSP has many advantages for developing countries like ours, such as helping expand our exports, accelerating GDP growth, and reducing unemployment. All of these laudable aims dovetail with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for instance relating to decent work, poverty alleviation, and women's emancipation.

The EU and the UK together account for about 60 percent of Bangladesh's exports, more than 90 percent of which consist of textile and clothing items. This indicates how valuable the EU's GSP has been for Bangladesh over the years.

Though Bangladesh's GSP status is set to expire in 2023, a similar scheme is expected to be in place to provide our country with duty-free access to the EU until 2029.

But will Bangladesh be able to move into the new regime automatically? There is good reason to pose this question.

Bangladesh needs a Plan B, surely. We cannot rely solely on the competitive advantages conferred by duty-free trade. We must start preparing for 2029 now.

One option which many are mentioning is that Bangladesh could make a case for GSP+. This is similar to the current GSP in some ways. For example, it cuts tariffs for vulnerable low and lower-middle income countries. But, to qualify for GSP+, countries must sign and ratify 27 international conventions related to labour and human rights, environmental and climate protection, and good governance.

So, would Bangladesh qualify for the GSP+? There are absolutely no guarantees for this, unfortunately.

Firstly, even where GSP is concerned, Bangladesh has had a bumpy ride at times. There have been occasions when the European Union has threatened to revoke our GSP status. This is because of accusations that our garment industry is not meeting stipulations laid down by the International Labour Organization (ILO) pertaining to labour and human rights.

There are always conditions attached to trade agreements. The EU increasingly lays a huge emphasis on labour rights (and rightly so). But, with Bangladesh always under such global scrutiny, there is a concern that sooner or later, we might risk losing the GSP – or the GSP+, if it is granted – due to a few “rotten apples” in our ready-made garments industry. As the saying goes, you are only as strong as your weakest link.

I am not ruling out the possibility of Bangladesh being granted a place in the GSP+. I would rather argue that we need to also prepare for a time when we can stand on our own two feet as far as international trade is concerned. To do this, I believe we now need to make faster moves on bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and also preferential trading agreements (PTAs) with some of our existing trading partners, where we can negotiate mutually gainful benefits and opportunities. It is a new game that our government and businesses must start preparing for.

FTAs will take us to a new world of

“survival” where “trade-offs” (read: give and take) will determine the game. It is much more than simply reducing and/or eliminating tariffs between trading partners. Such agreements these days are more complex and multi-layered and are often subjected to dominant geopolitics. They help address barriers that might otherwise restrict the flow of goods and services, and encourage inward investments. There is no choice but to improve and strictly enforce domestic rules, policies, and standards in regard to intellectual property, e-commerce, and public procurement.

As well as providing trading benefits for Bangladeshi RMG exporters, FTAs could give domestic businesses and consumers improved access to a wider range of competitively priced goods and services, technologies, and innovative practices. FTAs can also help to promote regional economic integration while building shared and mutually beneficial approaches to trade and investment between Bangladesh and its trading partners. Many opine that Bangladesh is still too slow to engage on FTAs and instead depends more on its GSP status to accelerate its garment exports to the EU.

Recently, Bangladesh's Commerce Minister, Tipu Munshi discussed the settlement of an omnibus trade agreement with India. A joint feasibility study on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has now been carried out after the two countries agreed to explore a bilateral FTA+.

Under a CEPA, the two countries can either significantly reduce or completely eliminate customs duties on the majority of goods traded between them. A CEPA would also ease facilitating trade for services and attracting investments.

In recent years, Bangladesh's leaders have also considered adopting FTAs with China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Canada, and Malaysia. Bangladesh has also been mentioned as a potential member of the Eurasian Customs Union and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a regional trade agreement among the Asia-Pacific nations.

If one is specifically thinking about apparel production, there is a clear opportunity for Bangladesh to negotiate FTAs with raw material producers like cotton-producing African countries. Could reducing or removing import duties on cotton for such countries be agreed upon in return for the duty-free export of Bangladeshi garments? I see little reason not to consider so.

FTAs bring about a wealth of opportunities for Bangladesh. It all depends on how deftly, strategically, and futuristically Bangladesh can assess its present and possible future scenarios and negotiate accordingly. I see the steady implementation of FTAs as being symbolic of our country no longer being reliant on trading agreements with the huge EU block, and being ready to better negotiate in our own ways with partner countries from around the world.

To ensure that FTAs deliver, I believe, our companies in our garment industry will need to develop in tandem and move steadily away from low-value, staple products. We need to re-define and accept newer production functions and realities. Countries with better, more varied product mixes will invariably have a higher place at the negotiating table when it comes to FTAs.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

11920s art style

5 Nursery rhyme start

11 Tennis star

Lendl

12 Fred, Steve, and Tim

13 Suit piece

14 Winter showers

15 Tough wood

16 Source of bad luck

17 Support

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27 “Understood”

28 Similar

30 Chump

31 “Sure thing!”

32 Young pigeon

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30 Nearest star

33 Calls it a day

34 Fill completely

36 Take it easy

37 Fencing sword

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39 In the past

40 Dandy

41 Inquire

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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