

Is this the best the BRTA can do?

New guideline on motorcycle use unlikely to be effective without wider reforms

The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has prepared a draft Motorcycle Operation Control Guideline that, if approved, will thenceforth govern the use and purchase of motorcycles, the vehicle responsible for the highest number of road crashes in recent years. The draft, according to a report by this daily, has recommended a number of restrictive measures, including disallowing purchase of motorcycles without a driving licence, requiring a licence to get a motorcycle registered with the BRTA, disallowing carrying a pillion passenger on highways, setting speed limits, etc. The purpose, we're told, is to control operation of bikes and curb road accidents.

The guideline is perhaps the first policy response to the unique problem caused by the unregulated use of motorcycles. It is, we must admit, an improvement on misguided calls for a blanket ban on motorcycles – particularly from quarters linked with bus transport associations, allegedly to cut competition. Instead of clamping down on bikers in general, it recommends control measures in four stages – at the production or import level, at the point of sale, at the point of registration, and during use of motorcycles – thereby distributing responsibilities among all stakeholders. As far as intentions go, the draft seems to be in the right direction. But whether it will be effective in preventing crashes is a different matter.

Even if we disregard the elephant in the room – the lack of ability of the government to implement such a guideline – we must say that the very idea that accidents happen because of the lack of a licence/registration, or driving skills, is a narrow view of the problem. It ignores other contributing factors, such as speeding by other vehicles, the culture of violating traffic rules, the chaos in the transport sector, etc. Where's the initiative to fix these persistent problems? Why is nothing being done about improving the capacity and services of the BRTA? Given how bad the situation is – with at least 7,713 people killed in 6,829 crashes in 2022 – a guideline can only be part of a central road safety policy which has been woefully missing.

Even that guideline suffers from narrow thinking. For example, it recommends that bike producers, assemblers and importers will provide at least two days' safety training to buyers before handing over bikes. This laughable approach to training – putting the burden on the supply side of bikes – throws into sharp relief the BRTA's own inadequate training infrastructure. The fact is, the BRTA itself needs regulating before it can become a reliable regulator. It needs to start implementing the Road Transport Act properly before it can be expected to properly implement any guideline.

Bangladesh, as one of the most unsafe countries for travellers, has reached a point where it must show results – not cosmetic initiatives. While the draft guideline fills the vacuum in terms of regulating the operation of bikes, it cannot reduce road crashes unless we initiate wider reforms, including ridding the BRTA of corruption and irregularities, eliminating conflicts of interest in the policy circles, disciplining the unruly transport associations, and building a functional traffic management system.

Protect women migrant workers from abuse

Govt must investigate the cause of their deaths abroad

It is a painful and shameful revelation that some 709 women migrant workers have died in different countries in the last five years (from 2017 to 2022). According to a *Bonik Barta* report, after analysing the death certificates of the 691 workers arriving by October 2021, around 69 percent of the deaths were found to be due to “natural” causes like illness, while 31 percent were due to “unnatural” causes like suicides and accidents. In case of Saudi Arabia, suicides accounted for 24 percent of deaths.

No wonder then that around 48 percent of families of these women do not believe the causes mentioned in death certificates, because no autopsy was done after their bodies arrived in Bangladesh. A study by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), which interviewed these families, has revealed this heart-breaking picture. These women, who mostly worked as domestic workers, were in contact with their families; they talked about the harsh conditions in which they worked, including inhuman working hours, physical, mental or sexual abuse, etc. In 2019, the dead bodies of 130 women migrant workers came to Bangladesh; 24 of them had apparently died by suicide.

These figures speak of unbelievable suffering that these women faced before their untimely deaths. Many among the deceased had gone to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Lebanon looking for a better future – their average age was 39. Is it believable that a majority of these women died of natural causes as mentioned in their death certificates?

We demand that our government conducts a proper investigation of all these deaths – both “natural” and “unnatural”. It is reprehensible that while we eulogise the remittances earned by migrant workers, many among them are dying at young ages and under suspicious circumstances, but we do not even bother to find out the reason. Greed for foreign exchange has led to such moral depravity whereby we gleefully send our workers abroad without even finding out what kind of environment they are going into. Often, they are trapped, their phones are taken away, and they have nowhere to go. Some resort to suicide while others die slowly because of deprivation, lack of medical care when they are sick, or other forms of abuse at the hands of their employers.

It is absolutely incumbent on our government to ensure the rights of these workers, especially women workers, who are even more vulnerable to abuse. Remaining silent for fear of offending host countries is not acceptable. Our government must take effective measures to stop this gross violation of human rights. The first step has to involve a thorough investigation to find out the real cause of death of each of these women migrant workers. Engaging and holding the host countries accountable, as well as directing our embassies abroad to provide support to these women, must follow.

What is holding Bangladesh's GDP growth rate down?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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The other day, I was engaged in a conversation with some of my associates in the city of Cambridge. One of my friends, a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, quizzically looked at me and said, “I think the Bangladesh government is hurting the country's GDP growth rate by obsessing with the GDP growth rate.” It gradually dawned on me that he was referring to a well-known paradox: “GDP fetishism.” As Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize-winning economist put it, “If we have poor measures, what we strive to do (say, increase GDP) may actually contribute to a worsening of living standards.”

In addition to poor measurement, we have repeatedly pointed out that the country's GDP growth is crimped by three well-known curses: rampant corruption, rising inequality, and continuous financial mismanagement. Econometric simulations have shown that we could have achieved a double digit GDP growth rate if we had urgently addressed these three perennial problems.

In the interest of showing that our national income is growing very fast, government officials are promoting megaprojects at the cost of efficiency. In addition, statistical offices are making up numbers that often conceal the actual cost of the choices of projects or technologies. For example, for the Matarbari power plant project, the cost per megawatt (MW) capacity basis is around USD 5 million compared to a range of USD 488,000-657,000 for four similar-sized plants in China, or 8 to 10 times more expensive.

In the long run, the pursuit of GDP growth at the expense of people's well-being will bring down the growth rate, and hurt the people whom the elected officials should serve. In the short term, the rush to finish megaprojects before the 2024 elections has lowered the GDP by one percent.

We are not alone in this regard, though. A few years ago, a study showed that China overreported its economic growth between 2008 and 2016 by an average of 1.7 percentage points. The discrepancy came from local governments who were rewarded for meeting growth and investment targets.

Can't the ruling party, which is



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

aiming to come to power again through the forthcoming 12th parliamentary election, also put lowering corruption, improving the healthcare system, and providing better nutrition on its list of priorities? Can't our leaders initiate a crusade like Ukraine's President Zelensky, who fired some of his key lieutenants tainted by corruption?

There is compelling evidence that addressing high and growing inequality is critical to promote strong and sustained growth, and needs to be at the centre of the policy debate, said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría. “Countries that promote equal opportunity for all from an early age are those that will grow and prosper.”

Rising inequality is estimated to have knocked more than 10 percentage points off growth in Mexico and New Zealand over the past two decades up to the Great Recession. In Italy, the UK and the US, the cumulative growth rate would have been six to nine

percentage points higher had income disparities not widened, as well as in Sweden, Finland and Norway, although from low levels. On the other hand, greater equality helped increase GDP per capita in Spain, France and Ireland. Bangladesh's obsession with the GDP growth rate is simultaneously causing collateral damage. It is taking our collective attention away from the

government's obligation to our people to provide jobs, nourishment, and protection from the vagaries of nature. Our obsession with GDP growth is not what will help us; rather, we ought to strengthen our social safety net and healthcare services. Around 30 percent of people in Bangladesh are facing food insecurity, according to a World Bank survey.

Empirical evidence suggests that corruption reduces the ratio of investment to GDP, lowers investment and disrupts economic growth to a significant extent. Even our own Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) estimates that corruption reduces our GDP growth rate by three percent.

According to the World Bank, the average income in countries with a high level of corruption is about a third of that in countries with a low level of corruption. Also, the infant mortality

recall that in 2018, the prime minister said if her party came to power again, the country's growth would reach 10 percent within the next five years. Well, that did not happen. The focus on GDP is coming back again this year now that another round of parliamentary election is on the horizon. In December, the prime minister declared, “I believe and I can assure everyone that we will be able to achieve our targeted growth rate.” I have also seen projections that our country is “on track to be a trillion-dollar economy by 2040.”

It is understandable that during an election year, growth in income or other catchy phrases like “middle-income country” have a better appeal in the news media. However, we must also look at the other metrics that have a rightful place in our national dialogue as we try to attain sustainable development.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Age of Verbiage



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The annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos used to be the premier destination for renowned academics and public figures to comment on the state of the world. But nowadays, the destination is just a click away. Our social-media-driven news ecosystem is virtually drowning us in expert opinion, inundating us with so much verbiage that little room is left for thoughtful analysis and focused debate – the oxygen of healthy public discourse.

Consider, for example, how quickly and how often the expert consensus shifted throughout the Covid pandemic. China did a far better job containing the spread of the virus than many liberal democracies, until its draconian zero-Covid strategy demonstrated the failure of autocracy. And, despite the surge of infections in the weeks since policymakers abruptly abandoned the strategy, it is still possible that China will have fewer excess Covid-related deaths than the US. Others argued that polarised societies like the US would fare worse than countries with high levels of social trust, until Sweden became a cautionary tale. And India was

considered to be performing relatively well until the catastrophic death toll of the Delta variant revealed the scale of the government's mismanagement – and the latter, too, seems slightly less severe in hindsight, following the country's successful vaccination drive.

Then there is the great US inflation debate. Initially, it seemed like Team Transitory – the inflation doves who predicted that prices would go down quickly – had it right. But then the persistence of high inflation vindicated the hawks who had called for the Federal Reserve to engineer a massive recession to restore price stability. Nowadays, the doves are flying high again, as inflation seems to be declining without the Fed having to inflict excessive pain on US labour markets.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, soaring inflation, and the escalating rivalry between the US and China have given us the term “polycrisis” – the *Financial Times* word of the year – to describe today's confluence of calamities. But the global economy seems to have escaped the worst, at least for the moment, and the

International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects growth to pick up next year. *The Economist* now speaks of a “poly-recovery.” Similarly, the doom-and-gloom predictions that characterised the spring and summer of 2020, the height of the Covid crisis, did not materialise, and the world economy turned out to be more resilient than many had believed.

And remember the warnings of a “winter of discontent” in Europe and the looming threat of wartime energy rations? Instead, gas prices have been declining steadily since the summer. And many of the same analysts who predicted a few months ago that the Chinese economy was about to collapse were proclaiming that “China is back” just a few weeks later.

The current fickleness of expert consensus is rooted in a media environment that rewards instant theorising and glib generalisations as long as they are delivered with absolute certainty. When reality exposes the flaws in these hypotheses, the expert caravan simply moves on to the next topic without self-reflection or accountability, leaving viewers and readers dumbfounded.

To be sure, expert opinion is still valuable, despite its increasingly ephemeral nature. But experts inhabit the same world as everyone else, and thus are not immune to the cognitive effects of its frantic pace. Given that institutions like the IMF are tasked with providing real-time analyses and predictions in a rapidly changing environment, getting things wrong

or having to pivot on a dime is an occupational hazard. And, arguably, the warnings and instant analyses might be responsible for policy actions that preempt worst-case scenarios. Howling like a wolf can sometimes keep the real wolf at bay.

Still, one cannot deny the fact that there are too many overconfident experts making too many predictions about too many issues too quickly these days. A basic economic principle is useful here: the 24-hour news cycle has created a huge need for expert opinion, and the market has simply created the supply to meet the growing demand.

But some correction is required. When he received the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974, Friedrich von Hayek famously suggested that his fellow laureates take an economist's Hippocratic oath: avoid commenting publicly on matters beyond one's immediate expertise. Winning such a prestigious prize, he said, should come with a certain responsibility. The same could be said of all current purveyors of elite opinion.

While voluntarily reducing one's profile may not seem appealing to many experts and intellectuals, it is the only way to avoid debasing the public discourse. Without a modicum of self-restraint, the constant stream of hot takes might end up undermining the informed debate that undergirds all open societies. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein, whereof one cannot say anything of substance after considered reflection, thereof one must be silent.