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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Don't normalise risky living

Dhaka's unsafe buildings pose too great a risk to be left unaddressed

Given how vulnerable the majority of buildings in Dhaka are to fires, explosions or collapses because of their questionable construction and maintenance practices, it seems almost natural that residents would go on reeling from one disaster to another. The question is not whether a tragedy will strike again, but how soon. Only the other day, we drew attention to the fact that three accidents took place in rapid succession – first in Gulshan, then near Science Lab intersection, and then in Gulistan, the latter killing 23 people so far. And now there is news of yet another tragedy, in Savar this time, where almost the entire roof of a 10-storey government building collapsed, injuring at least 16 workers. While the cause of the incident is yet to be determined, there is no doubt that questionable construction practices had some role to play in it.

Unfortunately, it's not just residential/commercial buildings that are at risk of accidents. As per a report by this daily, many of the city's kitchen markets are also in danger. Over the last two decades, a total of 19 kitchen market buildings were identified as risky, yet those continue to be in operation. Of them, nine are under the DNCC, and 10 under the DSCC. Despite promising to phase them out and relocate shops to new buildings, the city corporations have done little so far beyond putting up signboards. Millions continue to visit these establishments at great personal risk. Whose fault will it be if any of those buildings collapse or meet any other tragedy? Why do city authorities continue to ignore the red flags? Such reckless negligence is totally incomprehensible.

Risky living, risky shopping, risky breathing, risky commuting – there seems to be no end to the plight of residents, just as there is no end to the mismanagement perpetuating these risks. Just imagine: There hasn't been a single conviction in any of the cases related to major fire incidents over the past decade. Owners of factories or establishments who should have been held responsible for criminal negligence are dodging justice, with their businesses operating as before. More alarmingly, institutions whose corruption and negligence are allowing dangerous construction and maintenance practices are never held accountable either, although doing so is key to reverse the situation. Reportedly, there are 54 agencies under 11 ministries to ensure governance in the capital. And if they were held accountable for every fire or blast or collapse, along with the unscrupulous owners of buildings, the risk factor could have been largely neutralised.

All this points to the significance of enforcing existing building, construction and safety regulations, and of establishing accountability for any violation regardless of the individuals and institutions culpable. Some urgent reforms are in order. We urge the government to immediately demolish the dilapidated kitchen markets of Dhaka and other at-risk residential and commercial establishments. Those at risk of fires, explosions or collapses as a result of weak foundations or earthquakes should also be fortified. Recent events have shown the urgency of decisive actions to improve building safety. The authorities must not fail us again.

Rhetoric cannot save our rivers

State minister's words must be followed by proper action

The state minister for shipping has made a dire prediction saying that Bangladesh will not survive if our rivers stop flowing. He said this at a time when most of our rivers are facing an existential threat – while many have already died or are on the verge of death, those that still have some life left in them are also facing rampant pollution and encroachment. He further said that the government will rescue the rivers from encroachers, claiming they have made a list of river grabbers. While we appreciate the state minister's assurance, we think actions speak louder than words, and the government's performance in this regard so far leaves a lot to be desired.

Over the years, despite such promises and assurances, there has been little fruitful action to protect our rivers from pollution, encroachment and undue interventions leading to their loss of navigability. This is despite a High Court directive in 2019 awarding our rivers the legal status of "living entities". In it, the court gave the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) the responsibility to protect the rights of not only rivers but also canals, beels and other waterbodies. The HC also issued 17 specific directives to save the country's rivers and waterbodies from pollution and encroachment, including directing the authorities concerned to make a list of river grabbers and publish it in the media, declaring that river grabbers cannot run in any elections or get bank loans, etc.

Four years have passed since that landmark judgment. Has any of those directives been properly followed by the authorities concerned? Evidently not. We know that a list of 63,000 river grabbers was prepared by the NRCC in 2021. What happened to that list? The state minister has said that the list is being verified. The question is, why is it taking so long to verify it or take action based on it?

Meanwhile, the four rivers surrounding Dhaka – Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Shitalakkhya – have become so polluted by chemical, industrial, and household waste that their water is almost unusable now. The condition of the Buriganga is so bad that hardly any aquatic life can survive there. Back in 2009, the Department of Environment declared these four rivers Ecologically Critical Areas (ECAs), requiring urgent action to save them. Fourteen years later, these rivers are facing the same threats as before. The condition of other rivers across the country are pretty much the same, with many of them – Brahmaputra in Mymensingh, Dhaleshwari in Savar, Ichhamati in Pabna, Old Khowai in Habiganj, etc. – facing a slow death due to pollution, grabbing, sand lifting as well as mismanagement by the authorities.

This situation must change. We want to see action rather than promises that never really materialise. The authorities must take decisive actions to improve the condition of our rivers so that Bangladesh has a chance of surviving in the distant future.

How can Bangladesh avoid a middle-income trap?



Dr Sharjil Haque is an economist based in Washington DC. Views expressed in the article are the author's own.

SHARJIL HAQUE

In a recent visit to Bangladesh, the World Bank's leadership urged the country to take concrete steps to avoid falling into the so-called "middle-income trap". Similar concerns have been raised by economists in local think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). No doubt, this matter is increasingly coming to the forefront as Bangladesh is now all set to graduate from the Least Developed Country status.

The concept of a "middle-income trap" is usually credited to Indermit Gill, now chief economist at the World Bank, and Homi Kharas from the Brookings Institution. They argued that rapid transition from low income to middle-income country status which is often driven by cheap labour and export driven economic models, is likely to be followed by prolonged low growth rates. Their intuition is simple. As wages rise, these "newly minted" middle-income nations suffer from reduced competitiveness in producing labour-intensive goods (e.g., garments) because their wages are now too high relative to other low-income countries, nor can they compete with high-income nations that have far greater levels of technology and innovation. As a result, these economies experience sustained growth slowdowns and rising informal economies. The economic struggles of countries in Latin America are often cited as proof of the middle-income trap.

As economists, we attempt to understand empirical patterns such as those observed in Latin America through formal economic theory. However, we continue to disagree on a convincing growth theory that would help policymakers better understand the transition from a middle to a high-income country. Perhaps this has led to different and somewhat arbitrarily defined approaches to measuring the existence of the middle-income trap for a given country while leaving some questions unanswered. For example, is a country caught in a middle-income trap if the factors that cause a slowdown in growth (e.g., higher wages, global recessions) are different from the factors that sustain slow growth (e.g., corruption, poor macroeconomic policies)? Does the middle-income trap even matter if a country's GDP growth is just enough to "technically" stay out of the trap, but the economy suffers from rampant inequality? After all, Bangladesh's statistical bodies are notorious for inflating growth figures, so staying



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out of a trap should not be too difficult from a purely mechanical sense.

The middle-income trap is meaningful if we think about it in terms of the structural factors preventing steady progress instead of just the number of years a (middle-income) country experiences slow growth. It reflects a fundamental inability to shift towards sustained levels of high growth rates because domestic productivity and technology relative to advanced countries are too low. Make no mistake: this is the defining feature. Even though global economic shocks can slow down progress, if an economy has high levels of productivity, it will always revert to its expected long-run trend. The absence of innovative capabilities that allow an economy to shift towards higher value-added activities is the key reason why many countries have failed to transition towards a high-income economy. As such, creative destruction is the way forward for Bangladesh as well.

So where does Bangladesh stand in charting a technology-driven journey towards high middle-income status in 2031 and developed country status by 2041? The short answer is we have a tough road ahead. If the economic transformation of South Korea is any guide, a true journey to higher income brackets must be characterised by far greater domestic resource mobilisation, rapid industrialisation,

and careful macroeconomic management that is free of political intervention.

This is a lot easier said than done. Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio is among the lowest in the world, which naturally constrains private investment. The less said about the education sector, the better. Several industries such as information and technology, finance,

creation, technological progress, and skill acquisition. Herein lies the need for a more outward-looking trade policy that goes beyond thinking about ways to just protect inefficient domestic producers. Finally, we all know the domestic financial sector is severely underdeveloped while the banking system has suffered from numerous scams that exacerbated the

real estate, and even garments suffer from lack of skilled human capital. As a result, foreign workers are hired to fill the void. A report by this daily suggests that these foreign workers remit approximately USD 6 billion back to their home country every year, which is about one-fifth of our foreign exchange reserves. It is astonishing considering how many workers Bangladesh sends abroad every year because they could not find jobs at home. This is nothing short of a market failure stemming from below-par education that fails to equip the domestic labour force with the appropriate skill set. Effective education will require a complete rethinking of the way we train our students, in addition to higher budgetary allocations.

But the story does not end there. Macroeconomic management, while overall prudent, still needs to be far more progressive to transform Bangladesh into a productivity-driven economy. Several years ago, I had written on the rising global trend of exporting intermediate goods ("Trade policy: World racing ahead, Bangladesh standing still", *The Daily Star*, 2015). Fuelled by the fragmentation of production processes across different countries, many developing economies have substantially increased their exposure to global value chains (GVC). Participating in GVCs accelerates productivity, foreign investment, job

misallocation of resources.

One encouraging pattern I observed recently is the rising trend of venture capital (VC) investments in Bangladesh. VC investments typically come from seasoned global investment managers who spot promising opportunities in early-stage firms typically in sectors such as information and technology, consumer services, and health care. Moreover, VC investors typically bring institutional knowledge of best practices to grow a young business. Because young firms typically do not have the type of collateral needed to secure bank debt (e.g., machines, real estate), many promising startup ideas can never see the light of day. One must wonder if regulation can become more open to allow credit to flow to these sectors that carry tremendous long-term potential. For example, in the United States, banks can make direct private equity investments in startup tech firms, subject to careful credit appraisal of expected cash flows.

At the heart of it all, regulators must be willing to adopt a vision for Bangladesh that is more technology and productivity based. Not only do these challenges require new policies, but stronger institutions. Unless we accept that what worked before will not work in the future, achieving a sustainable growth path with shared prosperity will become a very daunting task.

Student evaluation is necessary to improve our public universities

Asmat Islam is lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Jagannath University.

ASMAT ISLAM

It is surprisingly depriving for our students that public universities in Bangladesh do not provide the scope of student evaluation. The relationship between student evaluation and protecting the autonomy of students is something that needs to be explored. In other words, it needs to be identified how the failure to provide a policy that supports student evaluation leads to institutional domination in public universities.

The global standard is for higher educational institutions to provide opportunities for students to assess their learning experience and outcomes through student evaluation. Student evaluations are necessary to ensure student-centred learning rather than teacher-centred learning. Nevertheless, there is a substantial lack of fostering student-centred learning in public universities in Bangladesh.

In general, student evaluation is important for a few reasons. First, student evaluation can help promote accountability and continuous improvement within the university.

Universities illustrate a commitment to meet the needs and expectations of their students by consistently pursuing and considering student feedback. This strategy is evidently proven to work continuously to improve the quality of their educational contributions.

Second, student evaluation often provides significant insights and feedback to instructors and administrators about the efficacy of a course or programme. It helps in identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement. Consequently, this scheme can inform decision-making and the development of innovative pedagogical approaches.

Third, student evaluation can provide a means for students to voice their opinions and concerns about their educational experiences – which protects their autonomy. In turn, such evaluation can help instructors and administrators understand how to better meet the needs of their students and also what they want. Unfortunately, public universities in Bangladesh do not execute a policy supporting student evaluation.

What is the relationship between depriving students in such a way and institutional oppression? Institutional oppression in public universities in Bangladesh refers to "systemic discrimination and

disadvantage" faced by certain groups. This systematic bias may occur due to societal structures and practices that favour certain groups over others. To be more explicit, institutional oppression involves favouring a policy for teacher-centred learning instead of student-centred learning.

The policy for an exclusive teacher-centred learning can be characterised by a distinct kind of institutional oppression. Institutional domination in the context of public universities due to the lack of a policy for student evaluation is different from economic and social discrimination.

In its simplest form, many students from marginalised groups, such as minorities, and the poor, face significant barriers to access to education and success in higher education leading to economic discrimination. Moreover, social discrimination is another form of institutional oppression that affects certain groups in public universities in Bangladesh. For example, students from minority groups may face stigma and discrimination in their daily lives. They may even be excluded from certain social activities or opportunities.

On the other hand, promoting a policy for teacher-centred learning only involves institutional coercion. Accordingly, students face systematic

discrimination, and the very nature of this domination is, clearly, distinct from social or economic discrimination in public universities.

However, the dominant policy of teacher-centred learning in public universities in Bangladesh indicates that institutional oppression in public universities is a complex issue. The lack of a policy for student evaluation affects students substantially. A just higher education system should incorporate a broader outlook that includes insights from students.

Public universities are autonomous and may have more flexibility in terms of their shared decision-making and functions. However, this autonomy also carries with it a responsibility to ensure that they are meeting the needs and expectations of their stakeholders, including students.

Therefore, executing a policy for student evaluation requires a rigorous effort to demolish the systems and practices that perpetuate discrimination and disadvantage in public universities. Any reasonable academic would recommend, thus, implementing a student-friendly policy immediately within public universities to foster student-centred learning. This will enable not only strengthening the voices of students, but also promoting equality and justice for all in our higher education.