

New chapter in partnership with World Bank

Bangladesh must make optimal use of the funds to benefit the people

It is encouraging to see the beginning of a new chapter in the partnership between Bangladesh and the World Bank through the signing of a fresh set of loan agreements to finance a range of new projects. The deals come on the occasion of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's official visit to the US to join the celebrations of 50 years of relations between the two development partners. The World Bank has approved a total of \$2.75 billion of loans to fund six projects in Bangladesh over the next five years, of which five deals worth \$2.25 billion were signed on May 1. We are also pleased to see that the funds are all aimed at facilitating sustainable and resilient development in the country.

The World Bank is one of the earliest and most prominent actors in Bangladesh's development journey so far. The country has the largest ongoing programme of the lender's International Development Association (IDA). It has had a significant contribution to the country's impressive growth over the past five decades. Currently, the World Bank is committed to 53 different projects in Bangladesh, involving \$15 billion. So, it is only natural that this partnership should continue as Bangladesh progresses towards becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2031 and a high-income country by 2041.

And why should this partnership not grow further? Bangladesh has an impeccable track record in repaying loans – sometimes ahead of the stipulated deadlines. The country's impressive achievements in poverty reduction, income growth, primary education, tackling climate change impacts, disaster management, etc should be reassuring enough that the World Bank can continue supporting its developmental goals. We are glad to note that both the government and the multilateral lender have moved past the conflict over the Padma Bridge, when the World Bank scrapped its offer of \$12 billion loan for the project in 2012 on corruption allegations.

It is not only this debacle that roughened up the relationship between Bangladesh and the World Bank. There has been growing dissatisfaction over the years that the lender has seemingly been rigid in its negotiations with low-income countries like Bangladesh, with a “take it or leave it” attitude and little interest in listening to and learning from the countries' knowledge and experiences. This sort of attitude has sometimes proven to bring more harm than good, according to economic experts. However, in recent years, there has been a substantial change in how the World Bank deals with countries like Bangladesh, and we hope that, moving forward, the relationship will be one of mutual respect and collaboration.

As Bangladesh prepares to officially become a developing country in 2026, it is time for both the parties to move forward with a new resolve for better, more levelled collaborations that benefits the country in a sustainable way. And the government, keeping in mind the development goals it has set for the country for the next 20 years, should prepare plans and strategies to optimally utilise the funds, while ensuring that the very best interests of the country's people are served.

Who will protect the unprotected?

Immediately implement policy regarding domestic workers

We are appalled by the news of torture of a 12-year-old domestic worker in Jashore. She was reportedly subjected to various forms of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of a couple over a period of nine months. Unfortunately, the case of the 12-year-old is one of countless such incidents that showcase the inhumane conditions under which domestic workers in our country are forced to work, in the absence of a proper policy framework and lack of goodwill from relevant stakeholders to implement concrete changes.

A recent study by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies and Dnet revealed that domestic workers are subjected to various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse (four percent), physical abuse (21 percent), mental abuse (67 percent), and verbal abuse (61 percent). But the sad reality is that an alarming 95 percent workers do not report any case of abuse. Many struggling parents send their children to work as domestic workers in the hopes that at least their meals will be covered, which means many don't have stable households to return to and are forced to tolerate the torture. Additionally, they either don't know who to reach out to for support, or don't believe the justice system can help someone in their economic position.

Domestic workers, constituting mostly women and children, are considered one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in our society. It is alarming that we do not have any comprehensive law to protect them, other than the Domestic Servants' Registration Ordinance of 1961 which states that domestic workers in five metropolitan areas of Dhaka must register with the police. Although the Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy was formulated in 2015, it is not legally binding, which may explain why we haven't seen any real results yet. The stakeholders of this policy – domestic workers, employers and law enforcers – are unaware that any such policy exists. It is extremely disheartening to see that the central monitoring cell, which was established three years ago under the labour ministry to oversee implementation of the policy, failed to convene a meeting even once during this time.

Meanwhile, the policy itself is not watertight. In fact, just last year the High Court condemned the policy for being “incomplete” and “vague” as it did not specify the amount of compensation for victims of violations, payment method, number of leave days, and appeal process for domestic workers who were denied leave.

It is high time the government took urgent steps to address the gaps in the policy, as suggested by the High Court, and ensure that it is implemented in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. It must also guarantee that law enforcement and the legal system provide necessary services to domestic workers if they are subjected to abuse. Meanwhile, NGOs and rights activists should focus on raising awareness among domestic workers regarding their rights and compensation. The government should also focus on establishing a minimum wage for domestic workers and sensitise law enforcement to better handle such cases.

EVICITION OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

Exploited by all



A CLOSER LOOK
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Do the city authorities ever ask themselves what happens to evicted slum dwellers and marginalised communities – including the Telugu, Harijan, and cleaner communities – living in various colonies once they are driven from their homes? The authorities have, over the years, failed to ensure the dignified rehabilitation of the victims in the aftermath of evictions. At times, authorities have acted irresponsibly and belligerently – in the face of concerns expressed by the National Human Rights Commission and various human rights groups – in accelerating these drives. On many occasions, even the High Court has had to intervene and give verdicts staying evictions.

But why such apathy for slum dwellers or hawkers or waste workers, who are living in designated colonies? Do slum or colony residents enjoy living in dilapidated, sub-human conditions? Do hawkers like sitting on the footpaths day-in and day-out, their skin burning under the scorching sun or being drenched by downpours, only to earn a meagre sum selling trinkets? Certainly not. But they endure these conditions because authorities have failed to provide them with dignified working

While unpalatable, the fact remains that it is the marginalised who fall the first victims of exploitation and discrimination, be it by criminals or the authorities. It is always them – lacking access to a dignified life, education opportunities, decent work, healthcare, adequate legal support, civic facilities, financial tools, exposure in the media – whose human rights are trampled upon by all.

and living conditions.

And when these eviction drives are conducted, without the rehabilitation or resettlement of affected individuals and families, it results in the double failure of the state in providing for the marginalised communities or even ensuring their basic human rights.

The problem is aggravated if



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

The grim fate of the Telugu community, who were recently evicted by the DSCC from a slum in Jatrabari's Dhalpur area, perhaps gives us an idea of how the TT Para Sweeper Colony inhabitants may fare post their eviction.

the eviction victims belong to the “untouchable” communities – Harijans, Telugu, among others – as they are stigmatised and shunned away by society as well, essentially rendering them homeless after evictions.

This happened in the case of the TT Para Sweeper Colony families, who had been evicted earlier from their homes without notice or rehabilitation. This community used to work under the railway authorities and live in the area adjacent to Phulbaria's old railway station, and moved to TT Para Sweeper Colony in Kamalapur 42 years ago, when they were resettled from their previous home, to make space to construct Nagar Bhaban.

Now, in the face of authorities' expedited drive to construct a rail line connecting Kamalapur to Jashore, this community is once again facing the risk of being uprooted – without any concrete or visible plans for their dignified resettlement.

Although authorities are saying that they will construct a building for this community in Shahjahanpur Railway Colony, accommodating so many families in one building – 112 families were evicted in 2019, another 27 families in December last year, and around 40 more families are at risk of being evicted any day now – will

provide a major logistical challenge for authorities.

Project director for the Padma Bridge Rail Link, Md Afzal Hossain, had a somewhat puerile response for a reporter of this daily: “Most people are living here illegally. Many of them are retired from the railway service, many of them work for the city corporation and most of them work in private

borrow money at exorbitant and unreasonable interest rates. Even then, there was only 150 square feet for each family. Those who could not afford to go to loan sharks have been rendered homeless and are now living in dire conditions – with the luckier among them sharing the homes of their friends and families.

Those who have managed to build

companies. I ensured that those who are living legally in the colony will be rehabilitated. A building is being prepared for them in Shahjahanpur Railway Colony. We will shift them there as soon as possible.”

His myopic reply raises many questions. Isn't the state responsible for retired railway workers? Did eviction authorities coordinate with the city corporation for the resettlement of those working for them? How many of the residents actually work for “private companies”? What will happen to those who live in the colony “illegally”? And what is the quantification of “as soon as possible”?

The grim fate of the Telugu community, who were recently evicted by the DSCC from a Telugu slum in Jatrabari's Dhalpur area, perhaps gives us an idea of how the TT Para Sweeper Colony inhabitants may fare post their eviction.

In the name of rehabilitation, the Telugu families were given land next to the slum to build housing for themselves, but without any money or other means to do so. How did the DSCC think the poor families would arrange money or find logistics to build themselves a shelter? With very meagre salaries and very little access to finance through formal channels, some resorted to loan sharks to

tin sheds on the land provided by the DSCC have no access to drinkable water, gas, or electricity. And only 20 basic latrines are available for their use, the conditions of which are so deplorable that they cannot be considered hygienic sanitation facilities. The DSCC mayor has cited the tender process as a cause for delay in addressing the problems facing the Telugu community. Those involved with the eviction and tender process could perhaps be invited to spend a night in the Telugu community's “residences” to experience firsthand their misery, if only for the process to be expedited.

While unpalatable, the fact remains that it is the marginalised who fall the first victims of exploitation and discrimination, be it by criminals or the authorities. It is always them – lacking access to a dignified life, education opportunities, decent work, healthcare, adequate legal support, civic facilities, financial tools, exposure in the media – whose human rights are trampled upon by all.

It is high time the authorities revisited their approach towards eviction, prioritising dignified rehabilitation and resettlement of the victims and ensuring their basic human rights, *before* eviction drives are conducted.

Making a university great, with climate action



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

Today's column is in response to the thought-provoking series of articles in *The Daily Star* on “What makes a great university” by Dr Syed Saad Andaleeb, Dr Ahrar Ahmad, and Dr Halimur R Khan.

I would suggest not changing the entire university sector in Bangladesh, but rather to develop a world-leading effort in research and teaching to tackle climate change – not in a single university but across all universities that wish to participate in the venture.

Bangladesh is at the forefront of having to tackle climate change out of necessity, so we cannot avoid learning how to do so. However, what is hitting us now will hit every other country tomorrow, which gives us an opportunity to lead the world in coming up with solutions.

The premise is to turn the challenge of tackling climate change into an opportunity for us to be the first to learn how to do so.

The first step in this effort has already been achieved by one of the world's first master's degrees in Climate Change and Development, started in 2012 at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), which has already produced over a hundred graduates from Bangladesh and other countries. Other universities are also developing courses on climate change, and should be encouraged and supported.

The second step, which has also been achieved, is a network of over fifty universities and research institutions called Gobeshona. This involves sharing knowledge on adaptation amongst member institutions. The

Gobeshona network is now ready to scale up its activities to ensure that members can carry out more research on how to tackle climate change. This will need significant investment from the government, from development partners, and from the country's private sector. The foundation has been laid, we now must build on that foundation.

As we enter the new era of climate change, all our educated children need to become educated on this topic. This education must not be classroom-based but field-based. It should not focus only on the problems, but on solutions. Our youth must be made capable of becoming climate champions.

The next step that needs to be taken is to enhance the teaching of climate change and environmental

topics at the undergraduate level in as many universities as possible, as quickly as possible. This will require a focused effort by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) and the Ministry of Education. As we enter the new era of climate change, all our educated children need to become educated on this topic. This education must not be classroom-based but field-based. It should not focus only on the problems, but on solutions. Our youth must be made capable of becoming climate champions.

All of the above can be achieved relatively easily and with modest levels of additional funding. But it will require a major change in attitude from all relevant authorities within and outside Bangladesh to work together in a concerted effort. If this could be done, then it would indeed be a major step towards creating a Smart Bangladesh.

This effort will not only help Bangladesh to tackle the impending impacts of climate change (which are now inevitable), but the knowledge we generate and the graduates we produce will be able to help other developing and even developed countries to tackle the global challenge of climate change.