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The existing safety monitoring entities in Bangladesh are still not effective enough in ensuring industrial safety in our RMG industry.

SAFETY IN RMG INDUSTRY

How are local monitoring agencies faring?

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April 24, 2023 marked the 10th anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster. The progress that has since been made to improve safety in Bangladesh's RMG industry is praiseworthy, thanks to initiatives such as the sustainability compact, National Tripartite Plan of Action of Fire Safety and Structural Integrity (NTPA), formation of Accord and Alliance, Remediation Coordination Cell (RCC), etc.

However, much of this success fades away when one considers that the country still lacks strong governing institutions that could effectively monitor safety issues in the RMG industry. On top of that, the emergence of new concerns due to the recent rise in workplace deaths and accidents has revived the age-old question: is the existing functionality and capacity of safety monitoring entities effective enough in ensuring industrial safety in our RMG industry?

Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE)

Over the years, particularly after the Rana Plaza collapse, the DIFE has expanded its technical and institutional capacity. Although still insufficient, the DIFE now has a bigger workforce and more skilled inspectors than before – the number of DIFE inspectors, for example, increased from 196 in the 2015-16 fiscal year (FY16) to 285 in the 2020-21 fiscal year (FY21). As such, the DIFE has been able to conduct more inspections in recent years than in the past.

However, the number of DIFE inspections in the RMG sector decreased by almost 43 percent in FY22, compared to FY21. It is unclear what caused the fall in the number of inspections, particularly when the scope for them remains higher with a larger workforce as well as the recent introduction of the Labour Inspection Management Application, a digital inspection application of the DIFE.

But more than the number of inspections, the quality of safety inspection remains a major concern: the inspectors allegedly do not perform their inspections as per their mandate. On top of that, the extent of disclosure of information from the DIFE appears to be shrinking. Besides, the common concern for DIFE still persists – underreporting of accidents, injuries, and deaths of workers in the RMG industry, which mismatches with the data reported by other public and private agencies. DIFE does not have an M&E department either, which results in no internal evaluation of its performance and weak management of safety-related data.

Remediation Coordination Cell (RCC)

A specialised temporary unit of DIFE, the RCC was initiated in May 2017 to oversee the remediation of 1,549 identified National

Initiative (NI) factories. The number of active NI factories reduced to 659 – some factories had to stop their operation due to safety non-compliances, others due to pandemic-induced bankruptcy. While the closure of unsafe factories has been a good sign, the slow remediation progress (at 54 percent) for the remaining active NI factories is still a concern.

A number of factors are responsible for this slow progress of remediation, including: a) NI factories operating in rented buildings; b) comparatively weaker financial capacity; c) limited eligibility for availing credit support for remediation; d) the financial emergency induced by the pandemic; e) lack of self-interest for NI factories and pressure from the government, business associations, and their buyers (mostly non-European and non-North-American).

Moreover, the remediation progress of NI factories is based on the original non-compliances identified during the initial inspection in 2013-2017. Understandably, new non-compliances have emerged in these NI factories, which are not considered for remediation progress. Moreover, the 54 percent progress does not necessarily mean remediation of the most hazardous safety compliances. This means that an NI factory can achieve higher progress in remediation while not addressing the most hazardous non-compliances. The data shows that the progress of remediation remained the least for non-compliances related to fire.

Industrial Safety Unit (ISU)

The responsibility of overseeing the remediation of NI factories has been shifted to the ISU, a newly formed unit of DIFE, transitioned from the RCC. Unlike the RCC, the ISU is a permanent unit, and its role is not limited to monitoring factory remediation of NI factories alone. Rather, the ISU is also dedicated to conducting safety inspections in non-RMG factories. However, till date, no distinct information and data could be availed from the DIFE regarding the current status of ISU. It is also unclear as to how the ISU will solve the many concerns that the DIFE and RCC had. For example, how the ISU will ensure that its inspector performs proper inspection, how its approach would differ from DIFE's inspectors, and how it will address the barriers mentioned above for the NI factory remediation are still not clear. Overall, sluggish progress can be observed in enabling the ISU to full functionality.

RMG Sustainability Council (RSC)

Although the RSC was expected to play a similar role as played by Accord, in reality, its functionality remains below par in many cases. As of January 2023, the RSC covered a total of 1,828 factories, for which the progress rate for the correction of initial findings was 91 percent. However, only 500 RSC-covered factories have completed full initial remediation. On top of that, the progress rate appears to be comparatively lower for a few common fire-related items.

It is alleged that there has been a lack of coordination between the RSC and other government agencies, resulting in slowed functionality. In addition, there is an allegation of indirect pressure (from employers and government agencies) on the RSC staff that prevents them from conducting independent assessments and resolving complaints actively, as they used to do during the Accord period. It is claimed that this is discouraging workers from reporting complaints through the RSC.

Although one of the key mandated jobs of the RSC is public reporting, a downgrade could be observed in terms of the disclosure of information by the RSC. There was no continuous information update on its progress after May 2022 until recently; in March, the RSC updated all the information together up to January 2023. It is unclear what caused this delay in updating the information.

In addition, an inconsistency is observed in the regular reporting format of RSC data on its website. These include the disappearance of data for certain indicators, inconsistency in the reporting period (some monthly, some yearly), absence of a detailed breakdown, etc. It should also be noted that there is no reporting on remediation progress in boiler safety. Moreover, as per the licence of the RSC, it must report its update every three months to DIFE. But given the irregular data reporting of RSC on its website, to what extent it is maintaining this responsibility remains uncertain.

What needs to be done?

The government's drive to increase the capacity of DIFE, including the ISU, must be continued. In parallel, the best utilisation of the existing resources needs to be ensured. In this regard, on the one hand, the accountability of its inspectors as individuals and the DIFE as an institution needs to be enhanced by increasing disclosure of information and taking action in case of violations of responsibilities. On the other hand, newly developed tools such as digital inspection, helpline service, priority inspections, etc need to be made fully functional. The current accident reporting mechanism of DIFE also needs major reform to capture real progress in terms of industrial safety.

In order to hold the RSC accountable, regular disclosure of its information needs to be ensured. The allegations of pressure from government agencies and businessmen need to be investigated. In this connection, initiatives need to be undertaken to increase the technical capacity and involvement of the workers' representatives on the RSC board. The collaboration between DIFE, RSC and MoC needs to be enhanced. Also, in order to hasten the remediation progress, timely implementation of the escalation protocol must be ensured.

This op-ed is based on the CPD RMG monitoring brief on "Emerging Concerns of Occupational Safety and Health of the RMG Industry: Role of Public and Private Monitoring Agencies," published on April 13, 2023.

Combatting the Rohingya refugee crisis with nature-based solutions

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In the first quarter of the past five years, humanitarian agencies and the Bangladesh government together have been launching the annual Joint Response Plan (JRP) to address the on-going Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. As a "Nature-based Solutions" (NbS) enthusiast myself, I am in a dilemma seeing NbS in 2023's JRP, like last year – should I be happy, or worried?

Environment and ecosystem rehabilitation have always been a cross-cutting issue in the JRPs. It is indeed exciting for environmentalists to see NbS finding its place in the world's largest refugee camp sheltering about a million of Myanmar's Muslim minority. NbS basically means protecting, restoring, creating, or managing terrestrial or aquatic ecosystems to tackle different challenges of our society. Over the last few years, NbS has been widely discussed in addressing ecological degradation, water and

Haor over the last almost 25 years, in Tanguar Haor since 2006, and in the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, just outside the refugee camps, and other protected forests over the past two decades.

But things are different in Rohingya refugee camps. Six years on, the Bangladesh government still officially identifies these people as the "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs)," not as refugees. Nevertheless, the Rohingya can be a part of the workforce to implement NbS interventions inside the camps and earn a wage while doing so – as they have been extensively doing it under numerous activities since 2018. But they cannot be a true part of the governance system, although the NbS standards strongly expect stakeholders to own the decisions they make and hold the system accountable for executing those decisions. Also, a core principle of NbS envisages that NbS



This 2017 photo shows a Rohingya refugee cutting into a hill to build makeshift homes.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

food insecurity, natural calamities, and the climate crisis, for example. To me, the most unique aspect of NbS is, from one NbS action, we get two types of benefits, simultaneously – human well-being and improved biodiversity.

On August 25, 2020, I wrote a piece in this column showing how different interventions implemented in the Rohingya refugee camps could be branded as NbS – be it restoring hilly stream banks to ensure easy passing of floodwater, creating water reservoir to reduce devastation from flooding, stabilising hilly slopes with terraces covered in grass and trees to stop landslides and, of course, expanding the green cover within and outside the camps to improve the landscape.

Like the JRP 2022, the new JRP 2023 aims to promote NbS as the agencies continue developing the camp infrastructure, including slope stabilisation and drainage systems. It also envisages climate-sensitive food production by practising climate-smart agriculture, opportunities for resilient income, land and water restoration activities, and sustainable water resource management as a means of adapting to climate change. Since 2018, as much as 3,200 hectares of degraded land have been reforested, and reforestation remains an integral part of the JRP 2023.

Despite these positive developments and future plans, my main concern is if we will see a full adoption of NbS principles and standards in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Peninsula. If we want to implement a true NbS, first we need to understand the local problems and design a suitable NbS intervention accordingly. Once an NbS is implemented, we need to periodically measure if it is increasing the local biodiversity, while giving benefits to humans. We also need to calculate the economic feasibility of the NbS action.

Both of these are doable, if we can allocate sufficient resources to bring in necessary expertise. But two other important features of NbS are: a) engaging local communities in NbS planning and execution; and b) negotiating and agreeing with them on the temporary losses and the long-term gains from an NbS. In other parts of Bangladesh, although challenging, such community participation is possible. We saw that in Hakaluki

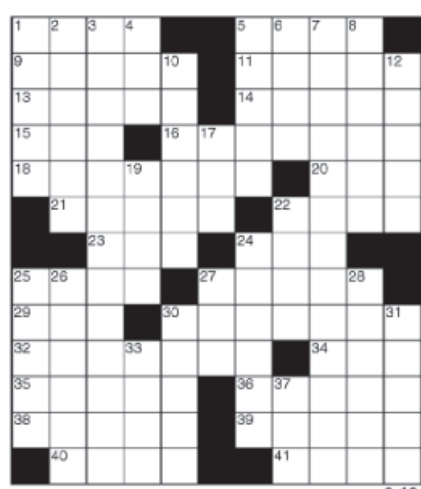
interventions should be implemented with "the full engagement and consent of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in a way that respects their cultural and ecological rights", which is not possible with the Rohingya in the absence of such rights. Another challenge in the camps is installing an adaptive management of NbS as these interventions are long-term ventures. Such a system needs regular collection of evidence to guide NbS management, which is not quite possible in the refugee camps, since we are not supposed to think of anything long-term for this settlement.

I believe contextualisation is the word we should be focussing on to address the above challenges. First, humanitarian and government agencies working in the refugee camps, especially in the environment space, should discuss how to contextualise NbS principles and standards in this refugee crisis, which is already burdened with uncertainties and is far away from any resolution. The Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) Secretariat should facilitate this process as it has been superbly doing so for the environment and energy sector. Second, there should be a "Community of Practice" to bring together agencies of Rohingya refugee camps, experts with knowledge on Bangladesh's NbS, and experts already working in the conservation-refugee crisis space around the globe. This will help to exchange ideas and expertise, and give the humanitarian leadership in Bangladesh to make NbS effective in Cox's Bazar, especially on how to bring refugees into the NbS process, without jeopardising the host government's stand on the crisis and vision towards a resolution.

Finally, a small working group is needed within the ISCG to oversee NbS interventions inside and outside the camps. This group can be a subset of the individuals already within the above-mentioned Community of Practice. This group is crucial to avoid misuse of the NbS concept, which may lead to "greenwashing" – where we brand something as NbS or pro-nature, but in reality, these are damaging nature in shorter and longer terms. By adopting the above actions to mainstream NbS into responding to a grave refugee crisis like the ongoing one, Bangladesh could be a pioneer in the world.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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1 Accord
5 Flag creator
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18 Craft show's cousin
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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

SHEA OSCAR
EAGLE ALONE
TIRES HANNA
PUKE SPUTTER
PUTTER ATM
ANON ITS
CROC AONE
JOE EATS
ALF BUTTER
CLUTTER ILE
KATIE AGAVE
AGENT LURID
LEDGE MASS