

Declare emergency over dengue surge

Lack of comprehensive, sustained efforts to control it may prove disastrous

In Bangladesh, often what’s more problematic than a problem is our approach to that problem. This is once again the case as we face an unprecedented dengue surge. The numbers of dengue cases and deaths this year have already risen to 20,878 and 106, respectively, way ahead of the peak season, which is typically between August and October. This has triggered fears that this year will be far more catastrophic than 2019 – when 1,01,354 people were infected and 179 died – if appropriate action is not taken.

This is where the bigger problem lies: can the authorities, even after all the disturbing news coming from overwhelmed hospitals, address the situation in the manner that it deserves? Health officials, at a press conference on Sunday, claimed that the situation had not yet reached the level of a public health emergency. Experts, however, disagree, pointing to the fact that dengue has already spread to all but one district in the country. What more do the authorities need to change their approach to the crisis? Waiting for the situation to worsen further before declaring an emergency could prove disastrous.

Such a declaration means acknowledging the gravity of the situation, and will also send a proper signal to the people. It should, in effect, allow for better mobilisation of resources, central coordination, and a quick and unified response. So far, the government’s approach has been characterised by sporadic and reactive measures. This is no longer enough, nor is just fogging or spraying. It doesn’t also help that government initiatives usually stop when the disease subsides. The fact is, dengue is now a year-round threat – thanks to climate change, unplanned urbanisation, high population density, and a generally unhygienic environment in our cities. So we need to counter it with a year-round, comprehensive response. The absence of such a response, particularly during the November-March period, has allowed the Aedes population to grow disproportionately, setting the stage for the current crisis.

Going forward, the government must establish an integrated vector management system that includes round-the-year monitoring of Aedes mosquitoes and sentinel surveillance, thus enabling targeted and proactive actions. Unfortunately, the formulation of a national vector control policy has been delayed for far too long, despite frequent urgings by experts. The government must expedite the approval of the policy and ensure its proper implementation. Additionally, it must centralise and adequately record dengue patients across all hospitals and clinics so that we have a more accurate picture of the situation.

There is a lot more that needs to be done, but what’s most crucial is that the government, city corporations, health authorities, and citizens all come together in the fight against dengue. It is time for proactive, sustained, and integrated efforts to prevent further spread of the disease and keep it contained in the future.

Are we just sitting ducks for hackers?

Protecting personal information of citizens must be a priority for the government

Worrying details about digital data security – or the shocking lack thereof – in different government organisations have been coming out over the past week or so, making us wonder whether the authorities really appreciate the importance of cybersecurity. Most recently, a report published by *Prothom Alo* has revealed the extent to which a number of government websites and servers are vulnerable to breaches. Even calling it a “breach” may be a stretch, as a simple Google search by anyone can apparently bring up personal details of citizens stored on some websites! This is not just a grave security concern, it is also a gross violation of privacy.

The above report mentioned one instance of fraud caused by such digital vulnerability. In 2022, a number of government officials who received grants from the Bangladesh Employees Welfare Board (BEWB) were duped by fraudsters, who stole money from their banks. The fraudsters were able to do that because those officials’ personal information was openly listed on the BEWB website. We are unable to understand how, in this day and age, no one involved with the maintenance of the BEWB website thought of this possibility.

There’s more. On July 9 this year, this daily reported a massive leak of personal information from the Office of the Registrar General, Birth & Death Registration (BDRIS). A few days later, it again reported that the infamous ransomware group BlackCat had hacked into the Bangladesh Krishi Bank’s server in June, and downloaded 170GB data including financial records as well as employees’ passport and NID information. In both cases, when the organisations concerned were warned about the breaches, they reportedly ignored them.

This surely cannot be the attitude of government offices and authorities in charge of the safety and well-being of citizens. With the increased digitalisation of our lives, the risk of cybercrimes is only bound to increase. Professionals dealing with digital data management and security should be able to anticipate all possible security risks and prepare accordingly. While we recognise the government’s efforts to digitalise its services, we must reiterate that since this requires storing personal information of citizens, the government websites and servers ought to be equipped with adequate security measures so that the data stays protected. To stop any potential leaks, IT experts have also advised the Election Commission to monitor all its partners who avail services from the NID server round the clock. The bottom line is, the authorities across the public system should employ preventive measures so that no breaches and leaks take place in the first place.

Stability without democracy can’t sustain growth



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In the run-up to the national election, the international community is showing increasing interest in Bangladesh, which is due to the prevailing geopolitical landscape as well as its prospect of becoming a larger economy in the coming years. The country is going to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) to the Developing Country category in 2026 by fulfilling the criteria based on per capita income, human asset index, and economic vulnerability index. It is currently implementing Sustainable Development Goals and has made progress in many areas compared to its peers.

Bangladesh’s economic success has been due to its relatively steady growth compared to many developing countries. In the pre-Covid era, the average growth of the economy was over six percent for about a decade. But starting in early 2020 and after the Ukraine war in February 2022, the economy experienced some dampening, leading to slower growth. Still, while in FY2020 the GDP growth was 3.45 percent, it went up to 6.03 percent during FY2023. With accelerated growth, there has also been social progress. The poverty rate has declined, and so have child and maternal mortality, while life expectancy has increased. Bangladesh now aspires to be an upper middle-income country by 2031 and a developed country by 2041.

Often, the growth story is linked to the so-called stability narrative. It is claimed that since there are no political disturbances from opposition parties, the government could succeed in navigating the country forward.

Ironically, under the shadow of stability, the quality of economics and politics has been compromised. Economic growth has not been coupled with the expected outcomes. Urgent issues such as job creation for the youth, domestic resource mobilisation, efficient public expenditure, and higher private investment need more attention. Inequality continues to rise. The latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022 reveals that the Gini coefficient has increased. This implies that the rise in per capita income has not been distributed evenly across the population. And shocks such as the pandemic, natural disasters and inflationary pressure continue to push poor and low-income households further behind.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

The manifestation of inequality is the fast-growing number of the superrich in Bangladesh. Wealth creation is good but only with an even distribution. Moreover, not all of this wealth is earned, as the wealthy include loan defaulters, beneficiaries of undue government support, and rentseekers.

Higher growth has also not created enough jobs. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 indicates that average unemployment has declined from 4.2 percent in 2016-17 to 3.6 percent in 2022. But the definition of unemployment is based on the conventional definition of the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) unrealistic benchmark, which considers a person employed if that person has worked even an hour in a week. Moreover, unemployment among the young population is much higher than the national average. The LFS 2022 has not revealed the youth unemployment rate yet. However, the youth unemployment rate was 10.6 percent in the LFS 2016-17.

Despite stability, private investment has not been energised for long. And stability has not reduced unpredictability. On average, private investment has been hovering around 24 percent of GDP, which is inadequate for a growing economy. Due to low domestic private investment, there is slow foreign direct investment (FDI). Despite the fact that the government

progress has generally been slow. Ease of doing business must be ensured by improving infrastructure, removing red tapism, ensuring policy clarity, adopting technology, and improving human resource quality.

Stability has protected the nexus between capital and political power. Massive conflicts of interest prevail in the system since many policymakers have stakes in fiscal, monetary, trade and other sectoral policies. Many in the periphery of political power have also been rehabilitated and rewarded. Hence, they do not want any changes (or disturbances) in this stability. Of course, democracy would require accounting of all unearned money and transparency of public expenditure.

The unique location in the Bay of Bengal, coupled with its economic rise, has increased Bangladesh’s importance in the region. Our stability has been supported by some international partners. As such, Bangladesh has been conducting a balancing act between two competing countries, China and India, quite well. Both China and India are important trading partners and have provided us with loans of various sizes. Naturally, they have an active interest in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s geographical position has also increased its geostrategic significance for the US as the latter aims to contain Chinese influence in the

Indo-Pacific region. The current US position is to deal with Bangladesh-related issues through the prism of India. Stability is important for the US, too, but not at the cost of democracy. The US has made this clear in its recent policies, which have been geared towards promoting democracy in Bangladesh.

Additionally, the EU Election

Exploratory Mission is currently visiting Bangladesh. They will undertake an assessment of the political environment and electoral framework, in close partnership and consultation with all stakeholders.

These developed countries are important stakeholders as Bangladesh’s economy is connected to them through trade, remittances, investment, education, science and technology, and much more. Therefore, it is natural that they would have a keen interest in Bangladesh’s politics and election administration.

But, ideally, this should not have been the case. Bangladesh should have been capable of holding an acceptable, high-quality national election on its own. Unfortunately, the credibility of the past two general elections has been questioned. The stability of power has probably been consolidated, but democracy has weakened. A transition to democracy and the nurturing of the democratic process will be painful and difficult. And the upcoming polls will be a test for Bangladesh to prove its capability and willingness to hold a high-quality election that will not be questioned within or outside the country. A democratic culture is crucial for sustaining the economic growth the country has achieved so far, and for distributing the benefits of this growth among all citizens of the country.

Driving sustainable development in the era of polycrisis

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We are living in an era of a polycrisis. The lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine continue to send shockwaves through Asia and the Pacific, disrupting global supply chains, depleting public finances, and driving up energy and food prices. Our region’s poorest and most vulnerable populations are the most affected, with their economic, educational, employment, and health outcomes being threatened. Traditional approaches to development are no longer enough.

If we examine pressure points within the region’s food, finance and energy systems, we see opportunities that leverage their interconnections to build back resilience in these systems, so they can better support the people they serve.

The ESCAP-ADB-UNDP 2023 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Partnership report sheds light on how countries in Asia and the Pacific have experienced the fragility of this “connected ecosystem” firsthand.

High energy prices, for example, have pushed up key input prices in agriculture, affecting a significant proportion of the regional workforce, adversely disrupting the region’s food production and supply chains and putting at risk the livelihoods of millions of people.

It is clear that the region’s economic sectors are not only highly susceptible to shocks but are also interdependent. When one sector is threatened, the entire system and countless livelihoods hang in the balance. Isolated, single-sector solutions are therefore inadequate. We need to embrace the concept of “nexus thinking.”

Nexus thinking recognises the complex, systemic nature of global and local development issues and the need to integrate data and knowledge, plans and policies, and institutions and practice to achieve the SDGs. They are highly interrelated and, thus, we need to address challenges at multiple levels, focusing on identifying synergies and breaking silos.

Developing more robust,

coordinated, and integrated solutions demands nexus thinking. By recognising and studying the specific interconnections between energy, food, and finance systems, we can develop policies and practices that address crosscutting challenges in an integrated manner. In an era marked by polycrisis, this approach – though not as easy to deliver – yields

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more effective and comprehensive policy responses that address both immediate needs and long-term goals.

Our report identifies several countries in the region that have already taken successful strides towards implementing nexus thinking through solutions and good practice. Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines, for example, have embraced smart and low-carbon farming approaches, while

Singapore has fostered a public-private partnership for the development of renewables. In Thailand and Pakistan, agritech companies are supporting small-scale farmers in accessing finance. These initiatives stand out not only for their ability to introduce crosscutting solutions, but also for their meaningful engagement of diverse stakeholders across sectors and constituencies.

Cross-sectoral public-private partnerships can serve as a valuable tool in nexus thinking as they allow for a broader perspective on the risk and opportunity landscape that goes well beyond one sector.

Regional and multilateral collaboration also play a pivotal role in nexus thinking. Stronger partnerships between countries are indispensable for safeguarding the resilience of our region’s food, energy, and finance systems. Such collaborations remove barriers to cross-border trade, increase access to knowledge and technologies, and accelerate the just energy transition. Technical and financial support through multilateral platforms is also crucial for piloting and then replicating new policies and institutional arrangements, as well as scaling innovative solutions throughout the region.

We must recognise that emerging from a polycrisis requires these large-scale transformative approaches, if we are to get the SDGs back on track in Asia and the Pacific.