

What haunts us at night

THE OVERTON WINDOW



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Election day, predictably, was a hectic day for me—as it should be for a journalist. Work in different forms kept me busy till 11:30 at night. Exhausted from the day's work, I went to bed at around 2am, but my experience from that afternoon kept me awake for three more hours.

Earlier in the day, I visited one of the biggest slums in Dhaka. And what was evident is that people really are struggling beyond any comprehension to get by—at least for you and me, and definitely for the high and mighty who were running in the election, seeking (or, as some said, not seeking) their votes.

The first person that we (I was there with a young colleague) spoke to was an elderly man. He, it seemed, fixed bicycles and rickshaws for a living. The first question that we asked everyone was, "Did you vote?" His reply was, "No." Someone had apparently called him on his phone (he showed us the caller's number), verified his information, and said that his vote would be cast on his behalf, so he did not need to bother about going to the polling centre. We then asked what he expected from those running for office. His reply was, "Nothing. Since politicians no longer need people's votes, they couldn't care less about us."

While speaking to an extremely shy young woman outside of a tiny roadside restaurant, another man called us in. Saying he wasn't afraid to speak his mind, no matter the cost, he then went on to say that people were afraid to speak their minds because of the repercussions, but given the situation in the country, someone had to tell the truth. He said he was earning Tk 10,000 a month. With that salary, he could no longer afford to feed his children, his wife

and himself three square meals a day, because of rising commodity prices. "People used to say Bangladeshis eat fish and rice. Now we can't even afford potatoes with rice because potato prices are so high. Forget about fish and meat." He mentioned how the poor are suffering, and how politicians have lost all ability to empathise with them. He couldn't believe how human beings could fail so miserably to feel any empathy for other human beings, and it was apparent on his face that his shock was genuine.

Eventually, we approached an elderly man who was selling jujube fruits in a basket. The 78-year-old said he didn't go to vote; some ruling party men had asked people in the slum to submit a photocopy of their NIDs, which he did. They then told him that he didn't have to vote. With tears in his eyes, he said that is the real state of things for people like him. He said

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About 18 lakh people live in slums across Bangladesh, according to the latest census data.

he was struggling terribly to survive, but he always remembered his father telling him when he was younger that no matter how difficult life gets, he should always work hard for a living. That is why he has stuck to doing honest work, and he will carry on doing so even if that leads to his demise.

The last person we spoke to was a middle-aged man who had suffered a stroke three years ago. He used to own a convenience store, but he could no longer afford that, so he shrunk his store down and was only selling cigarettes and a few other items. "I used to get by comfortably by selling Benson cigarettes for Tk 4 apiece. Now I can't earn a living by selling it at Tk 17," he said. "Politicians talk about development. But the majority of people are not getting anything

out of it." He said he hadn't been able to afford any proper treatment for the stroke he had suffered. As a result, the right side of his body has become paralysed.

"What sort of a country have we created? People no longer care for others. Is this development and progress?" he asked. This was not how things used to be, he lamented, adding that all discussions, whether about the elections or politics, are irrelevant as long as they do not centre around people. Most people like him have become invisible. They have become like ghosts to the rich and powerful, who are the only ones benefiting from the direction the country is headed.

These were the stories that haunted me that night, as well as the distressed faces of these supposed

"ghosts." If knowing about their suffering made sleep difficult, I wondered how the suffering itself would feel. To them, these are not just stories; they are their daily realities—which these human beings have to live through every day.

According to the preliminary Population and Housing Census 2022 report, about 18 lakh people live in slums across Bangladesh. Only recently, following a fire in a Karwan Bazar slum, the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) announced financial assistance of Tk 5,000 to each family affected by the fire. Two people died and nearly 300 homes were destroyed in the fire. If a man cannot run his family with an income of Tk 10,000 in Dhaka city because of inflation, how long will the affected families be able to get by

with Tk 5,000 assistance, especially with prices of rice, potato and other essentials rising again?

And how long will these 18 lakh people continue to lead such precarious lives, where they face daily uncertainties about how many meals they and their children can have? About when they can afford to seek medical treatment for their own ailments, as well as those of their loved ones? What haunts them at night? Is it the extreme difficulties they face day in and day out, or the complete lack of empathy they see from our "elite" class, which is driving our "development" model and is depriving us all of what these slum dwellers consider to be the foundational building block of what it means to be human?

Overcoming our environmental policy inertia



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With the start of 2024 and a new cabinet in charge, let's make a list of major environmental policy initiatives in Bangladesh that have been stuck in a limbo for many years.

I start with my personal favourite: the revision of Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), 2009. This was initiated back in 2018, just before the end of the BCCSAP's 10-year period. Although during 2010-2018, the BCCSAP ushered in the implementation of 624 projects by spending Tk 3,198 crore from the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), for some reason it was the German government that supported the BCCSAP revision. In different forums, we randomly learnt about the progress of this revision, but apparently received no formal updates from the government lately, except on two occasions: i) in his budget speech for FY2023-24, the finance minister acknowledged the updating of BCCSAP;

The slow pace of environmental policy formulation and execution described here is quite common in Bangladesh. First conceptualised in the 1980s, the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) holds the record of the longest approval time. Despite several attempts between 1993 and 2013, the draft NCS couldn't get the cabinet's approval.

and ii) in the latest climate budget report (2023-24), the draft of revised BCCSAP structure is briefly touched upon in the Executive Summary, but without any elaboration in the main text.

Despite the sluggish pace of the BCCSAP revision, over the past five years, the government approved the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (BDP2100) in 2018, the updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in



VISUAL: COLLECTED

2021, the National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh (2023-2050) (NAP2050) in 2022, and the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041 (MCPP2041) in 2022—all focusing on a resilient Bangladesh. I believe the government shouldn't invest more time in revising the BCCSAP, which apparently becomes obsolete under the changed climatological, political and financing scenarios under the changing climate. (In 2009, the revised National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) became obsolete in the same way because of the then brand new BCCSAP).

The new government should focus on two actions: first, identify synergies among the BDP2100, NAP2050 and MCPP2041, and prepare a guideline for the BCCTF to allocate resources in absence of an updated BCCSAP. Second, the government should prioritise and start implementing the NAP2050 interventions, which are pending for more than one year. These could give the government agencies and development partners the much-needed focus to channel available and anticipated resources.

The slow pace of environmental policy

formulation and execution described above is quite common in Bangladesh. First conceptualised in the 1980s, the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) holds the record of the longest approval time. Despite several attempts between 1993 and 2013, the draft NCS couldn't get the cabinet's approval. In the last attempt in 2015-2016, with BCCTF's money, BFD and IUCN updated the NCS with the help of 25 Bangladeshi experts. Seven years

later, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) made the final Bangladesh National Conservation Strategy (2021-2036) public.

On an opposite trend, one of the quickest legislative enactments was of the Climate Change Trust Act, 2010. It got approved in October 2010, just 13 months after the government approved the BCCSAP (2009)—implementation of which is the basis of this law. Similarly, soon after the 15th Amendment of the constitution, which added Article 18A and made biodiversity conservation a responsibility of the state, we saw the updated Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012. Five years later, the new Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 was enacted under this act, giving Bangladesh's 20-year experience of people-centric natural resource management a legal footing. In the same vein, we also saw formulation of the Ecological Critical Area Management Rules, 2016 (under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995), and the long-pending Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, 2017.

Although many of these legislations

assist the Forest Department to execute its responsibilities, the National Forest Policy, drafted in 2016, hasn't been approved by the cabinet yet. Drafted in the same year, Bangladesh Forestry Master Plan (2017-2036) is experiencing the same delay in approval. On the other hand, the Bangladesh Wildlife Conservation Master Plan (2015-2035) was prepared by international consulting firms in 2015, under the World Bank-supported Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Wildlife Protection (SRCWP) project. According to the 8th Five-Year Plan (2020-2025), the country's conservation efforts should be as per this master plan. But there is no mention of this plan in the crucial biodiversity documents, such as the fifth (2015) and sixth (2019) national reports to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) or the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) (2016-2021).

Speaking of the NBSAP, this policy instrument joins several other environmental plans prepared over the last 20 years, which failed miserably since the government hardly took any action to implement them over the stipulated strategic period. Other such plans include the NAPA (2009), the Bangladesh Climate Change and Gender Action Plan (ccGAP, 2013), and the Bangladesh Country Investment Plan for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change (2016-2021). The Bangladesh Capacity Development Action Plan for Sustainable Environmental Governance (CDAP 2007) is another prime example of being obsolete. This plan was supposed to synergise three Rio Conventions, namely the CBD, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The government has hardly ever acknowledged the CDAP (2007) since its approval, let alone implemented it.

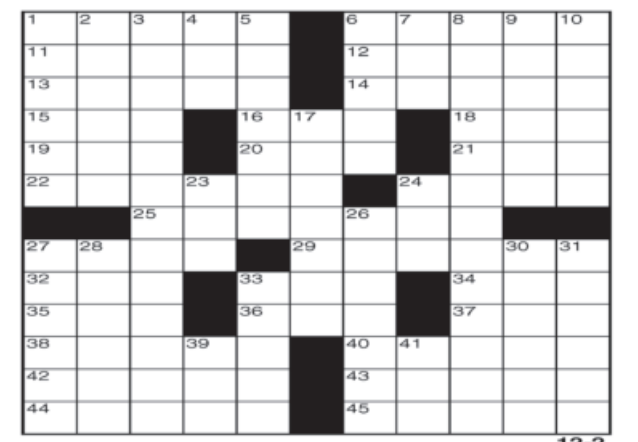
Finally, another group of policies includes those which never took off after initial conceptualisation. For example, in the first NBSAP (2004), the National Biodiversity Policy was outlined in detail. I can't remember hearing about it ever again.

Our new government will soon start preparing a new NBSAP for 2030/2050 in response to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) under the CBD, and updating the NDCs (2021). Being forward looking is great. But should we continue being a country that makes beautiful environmental policy instruments and then forgets to implement them?

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Small error
 - 6 First letter
 - 11 Flynn of films
 - 12 Low nobleman
 - 13 Stood up
 - 14 In the middle of
 - 15 Plop down
 - 16 Toward the stern
 - 18 Coffee, in slang
 - 19 Second person
 - 20 Once called
 - 21 Mess up
 - 22 Region
 - 24 Deck toppers
 - 25 Deluge
 - 27 Pack and send
 - 29 High jinks
 - 32 Status —
 - 33 Trickery
 - 34 Middle earth baddie
 - 35 Ensign's org.
 - 36 Army address
 - 37 "The Matrix" hero
 - 38 Crooked
 - 40 Bee-related
 - 42 Historic riverter
 - 43 Rap entourage
 - 44 ATM button
 - 45 Places
 - DOWN**
 - 1 Tenants' papers
 - 2 Come in
 - 3 Import opponent
 - 4 Sinking
 - 5 Franklin's wife
 - 6 Let up
 - 7 Hurried flight
 - 8 Theater worker
 - 9 Writer Balzac
 - 10 Ticks off
 - 17 Car racer Enzo
 - 23 Spinning toy
 - 24 Leaf carrier
 - 26 Snares
 - 27 Cube face
 - 28 "The Maltese Falcon" director
 - 30 Fold
 - 31 Treats with tea
 - 33 Fall flower
 - 39 Fiction
 - 41 Luau dish



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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