

The Daily Star

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## We must improve rural autism care

Many are being forced to seek treatment in Dhaka

A lot has been said about the woeful state of healthcare in rural areas, with issues like the shortage of doctors and other medical staff, physician absenteeism, and lack of functional equipment or options for advanced medical care plaguing government-run hospitals and health complexes there. That being the case, it is understandable that the urban-rural disparity in healthcare would extend to autism treatment as well. But that doesn't mean it is acceptable. The fact that this has been the case despite the flurry of initiatives taken about neuro-developmental disabilities shows the government's lacklustre approach in this regard.

As per a report by this daily, specialised care for children with autism remains largely concentrated in urban centres like Dhaka. It cites data from the 2022 National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) that found that access to autism treatment is higher in urban areas. In fact, both public and private facilities for treatment of behavioural disorder are mostly Dhaka-centric. As a result, families in rural areas are forced to either travel to the capital, sometimes repeatedly, or leave their children untreated. The story of five-year-old Ariyan's struggle, as highlighted by our report, encapsulates the challenges faced by many such families. With no specialist care available in their upazila health complex, Ariyan and his grandfather were forced to come to the Institute for Paediatric Neurodisorder and Autism (IPNA) at BSMMU, only to be rejected due to the high turnout of patients. Reportedly, 250 to 300 children on an average visit the institute with various neurodevelopmental issues, many from outside the capital. Of them, up to 130 can be served a day, and the rest have to come back at later dates.

For the patients leaving untreated, the burden of an unsuccessful visit extends beyond inconvenience; it impacts their well-being and future prospects. At the moment, only 34 district hospitals reportedly have very basic facilities—equipped with one child specialist, one psychologist, and one therapist—to treat such children. Moreover, the state of the care and rehabilitation centres for such patients at the district level is quite pitiful. Beside scant treatment options and support systems, including for specialised education, rural families also suffer because of their lack of awareness. This state of affairs is unfortunate given the growing number of people with autism and other neurodevelopmental issues in the country.

We, therefore, urge the government to take the matter of autism care and treatment, especially in rural areas, with the seriousness that it deserves.

## A health complex in search of doctors

Rural govt health facilities suffering from staff shortages

A recent report points to a critical staffing shortage at the Baniachong Upazila Health Complex in Habiganj district, once again highlighting a key challenge within Bangladesh's public health sector—lack of medical staff in rural areas. This lone, 50-bed government facility serves about 350,000 residents across 15 unions. However, it operates with only four doctors, which is significantly fewer than the estimated minimum requirement of 17.

The crisis extends beyond physicians, however. Reportedly, there are vacancies in crucial positions like gynaecologist and assistant surgeon as well as nurses, medical officers, administrative staff, and technicians. Notably, all pharmacist, lab technician, and radiographer positions remain unfilled, leaving essential equipment like the X-ray machine inoperable for over a decade. It goes without saying that this lack of personnel has had severe consequences. For the patients, particularly those in remote haor areas, critical medical emergencies necessitate a taxing 100-kilometre journey to Sylhet.

It was only the other day that we wrote on the woeful state of another government health facility—the 250-bed district hospital in Bagerhat—that is also suffering from a similar staff shortage, among other problems. The hospital caters to about 17 lakh people but is running with less than half of its required human resources, resulting in many patients being deprived of essential care. Understaffing in public healthcare facilities in rural areas is clearly restricting access to medical care for underprivileged communities and poorer households. Moreover, the concentration of amenities in major cities creates a geographical disparity in healthcare access. Rural families, deprived of treatment in their own localities, struggle to afford the high costs associated with seeking it in urban centres.

Healthcare is a fundamental right of every citizen, and ensuring equal and unrestricted access, especially for rural patients, is paramount. We, therefore, urge the government to address the shortages of staff at the Baniachong Upazila Health Complex and other similarly understaffed and struggling facilities. The authorities must prioritise allocating more resources in these facilities, ensure timely and proper recruitment, and improve access for rural patients.

New Message

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# Revised tariffs make a compelling case for clean energy



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The Bangladesh government recently increased power tariffs for all consumer categories due to the upheavals caused by a significant gap between power generation costs and corresponding revenue. It also revised the natural gas price for power generation. While inflationary pressures will likely remain high in the wake of electricity and gas price hikes, different energy consumers will now find clean energy investment more compelling.

A brief survey of around 40 industries by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) indicates that the industry sector has significant untapped energy efficiency potential. This is despite the fact that a good number of the surveyed industries have already installed efficient lights, motors and fans, variable-frequency drives, waste heat recovery boilers, etc. However, a considerable proportion of the surveyed industries are not utilising waste heat produced by their captive generators. Only a small number of

targets are the two main drivers influencing industrial energy efficiency investment. Therefore, the recent increase in electricity tariffs—around 9.9 percent per kilowatt-hour (kWh) for medium and large industries—and gas price—2.5 percent per cubic metre

2022, respectively. Similarly, the payback for the same fan is now 3.1 years for a household consuming around 250kWh of energy per month. Such a financial return should motivate households to use ceiling fans with lower wattage.

Households battling high energy tariffs should, therefore, assess the energy consumption of different appliances and their respective purchase prices to make prudent investment decisions.

The recent power tariff adjustment is a boon for rooftop solar expansion, both in industries and commercial buildings. They can now enjoy more savings per kWh of energy.

projects, it can tempt designated energy consumers and industries to gradually implement the remaining low-hanging energy efficiency measures and beyond.

Tellingly, SREDA should monitor the status of the mandatory submission of energy auditing reports by different industrial sub-sectors applicable from 2023 and 2024, respectively.

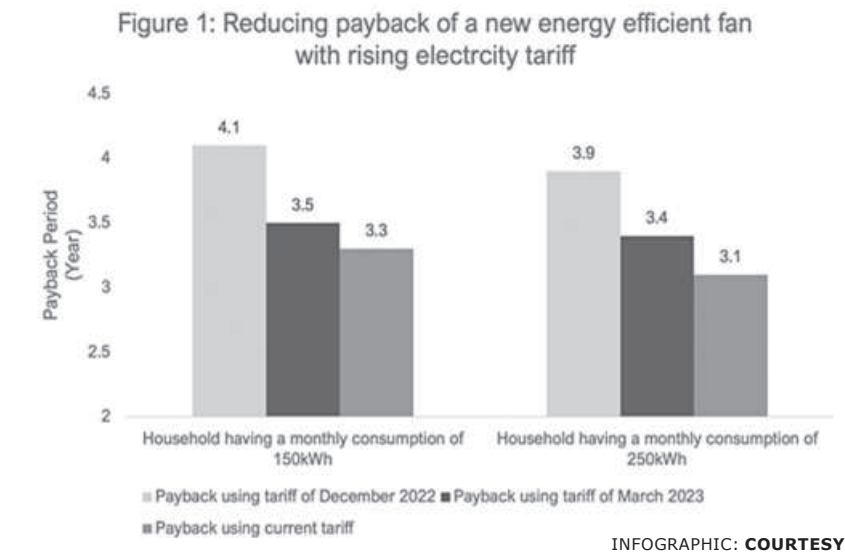
For households, the awareness level of energy efficiency should go beyond the general understanding that energy-efficient appliances save energy. Instead, they need to grasp that an appliance with the lowest wattage among its peers and serving the same needs is the most energy-efficient. Energy labels can help consumers choose the most efficient appliance. SREDA should coordinate with the government's Power Division to promptly approve and enforce the standards and labelling regulations.

While energy efficiency and rooftop solar offer green energy investment opportunities, challenges in accessing finance or limited financing lead to negative knock-on effects. The Bangladesh Bank's refinancing scheme of Tk 400 crore (\$36.44 million) is the least costly loan facility on offer for which environment-friendly projects of 70 categories compete. The rooftop solar financing facility of the Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL) is just a fraction of what the sector needs. Likewise, IDCOL's credit line of \$256.5 million for RMG and textile sector energy efficiency, supported by the Green Climate Fund, is not enough.

Conversely, the commercial banks' ability to deploy funds for loans at current market rates would not garner the interest from industries or commercial buildings.

It is therefore necessary to mobilise finance at scale, drawing on the window of opportunities that different multilateral development banks offer. The Bangladesh Bank may create a dedicated low-cost financing scheme for rooftop solar like it developed for the brick kiln sector, supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

In the throes of energy sector challenges, rooftop solar and energy efficiency would help Bangladesh manage the situation better. And if the country can advance energy efficiency and rooftop solar, taking a sectoral approach, it will end up with manifold larger benefits than one may think of. The investment signal is favourable as Bangladesh is already in the high energy cost regime and tariffs will rise further.



**While the first movers had less savings, the lucrative rooftop solar should now make inroads into all industries and commercial buildings with enough space and load-bearing capacity. Regulatory intervention will further catalyse the accelerated adoption of energy efficiency measures and rooftop solar.**

for captive power generation—will likely motivate industries to foster energy efficiency further.

Bangladesh's household sector consumed 55.69 percent of the grid electricity produced in FY2022-23. As such, increasing energy efficiency in this sector holds significant importance. Although many households are already accustomed to buying efficient appliances, 120W ceiling fans are still in the market when energy-efficient 35W ceiling fans are available. Perhaps people who can purchase efficient fans are unaware of the economics of using fans that consume less energy.

A ballpark assessment shows that the payback period of a 35W ceiling fan costing Tk 6,490 has now come down to 3.3 years for a household with a monthly energy consumption of around 150kWh (assumptions: 10 hours of operation for 30 days a year and five percent VAT on energy bills). The payback period was 3.5 and 4.1 years in March 2023 and December

industry samples use engine jacket water in chillers and water heaters. If all industries gradually install waste heat recovery boilers and start using engine jacket water in chillers and water heaters, they can save significant energy consumption per annum on an aggregate basis.

The survey also finds that cutting costs and reaching sustainability

### PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

## Nato is not a hegemonic burden



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As Nato marks its 75th anniversary, the idea that it is free-riding on the United States remains a live issue. While Donald Trump has repeatedly criticised US's transatlantic allies for spending too little on defence, it is worth remembering that presidents going back to Dwight D Eisenhower (including John F Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Barack Obama) also pressured the Europeans to share more of the burden. After Lyndon B Johnson's Secretary of Defence, Robert S McNamara, suggested that the US might reduce its troop levels in Europe if the Germans did not step up, the two countries entered an "offset agreement" whereby Germany would compensate the US by purchasing its goods.

To some Americans, Trump's fairness concerns may seem valid. Why should the US pay twice as much as the average Nato ally when it is geographically removed from all major conflict zones?

Part of the answer is that US's massive military spending is not simply a function of its Nato commitments; rather, it follows from a strategic objective to maintain unmatched military and technological supremacy in the face of escalating great-power rivalries. The cost of maintaining 200 US active-duty bases (90 percent of the total) around the world accounts

for only four percent of the country's overall military expenditures. Nato is a common good that results from the pursuit of a private national good: US military superiority.

The concerns about fiscal overspending exaggerate the problem, not least because they ignore the dollar's international status and the fact that a significant portion of US public debt is held domestically. Those arguing that military expenditures are a primary driver of US debt have little to no evidence, and they consistently fail to weigh the costs against the benefits that such spending delivers. Asymmetrical security relationships allow the US to exert influence and sustain its preferred form of global order through strategic advantages, information sharing, and diplomatic leverage, and to encourage adaptation across a broad network of dependent allies.

Nato is the blue chip in the US security umbrella—the instrument that allows it to respond rapidly to threats and challenges anywhere in the world. The forward presence of US military forces serves as a deterrent against potential adversaries, reducing the likelihood of conflicts and military challenges to US interests. This global network facilitates intelligence-sharing among allies and provides the US with critical information on

security risks, enhancing its ability to anticipate threats and counter strategic competitors like China and Russia.

Alliances are a distinctive feature of the US's global strategy, setting it apart from other great powers. By providing defence and security, it can also foster economic cooperation and promote its values. At a time when digital warfare respects no borders, Nato's intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and collective cyber defence mechanisms all reinforce US's ability to counter new economic and security threats.

Moreover, its position at the centre of regional and global security networks gives the US an unmatched ability to facilitate or obstruct international cooperation as it sees fit. Almost no major decisions or missions can be carried out unless they serve US interests. No other country can broker the kind of cooperation that the US can. Nato's strategic shift to address the rise of China through engagement with Indo-Pacific partners underscores both the alliance's adaptability and US's unique coordinating power.

Nor are these benefits confined to matters of great-power rivalry. For example, the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) coordinates counter-narcotics collaboration between Nato (specifically the Netherlands) and non-Nato countries such as Colombia and Panama. That not only bolsters security, but also cuts down on illicit financial flows that could end up going to terrorist organisations and other bad actors. By the same token, US-led allied efforts help to protect global trade routes—particularly vital sea lanes—ensuring the free flow of trade and energy supplies. A secure global commons provides the US

with economic leverage over allies and partners, allowing it to shape economic policies, trade agreements, and investment decisions according to its own interests.

Generally speaking, shaping norms and aligning interests across international networks reduces protection costs, alleviates the need for military coercion within the network, and augments its effectiveness when used externally. From a security perspective, if the US becomes less willing to fund a potent military capability through Nato, and less willing to engage with and protect its allies, it will start to look more like China or Russia. It would still be formidable, but it would be less influential and less benign.

Europeans are already preparing for the worst and pushing forward with their project of "strategic autonomy." Citing vassal risks from great-power competition, French President Emmanuel Macron favours reducing Europe's reliance on others, particularly the US. By adopting a more assertive stance against Russia, advocating for Ukraine's future Nato membership, and leveraging EU enlargement as a geopolitical tool, France has realigned its position more closely with that of Poland, the Baltic countries, and the Czech Republic.

Americans must understand that Nato is not just a mechanism for protecting allies; it is an essential part of a comprehensive strategy that promotes their own interests and sustains their country's global leadership position. The US would gain nothing by withdrawing from the transatlantic alliance. On the contrary, doing so would reduce US influence without significantly reducing its military spending.