

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Stop ignoring health and education needs

Allocations for these sectors and their capacity must be improved

It is disappointing that the education and health sectors are once again set to get less Annual Development Plan (ADP) allocation than what has been prescribed in the 8th Five-Year Plan. Their apparent downgrading seems to have become a trend over the last four years, which is unfortunate. According to the draft development budget likely to be placed before the National Economic Council on May 16, the health sector will receive 7.8 percent of the ADP allocation in fiscal year 2024-25. However, the 8th Five-Year Plan for fiscal years 2020-21 to 2024-25 prescribed 11.1 percent of the ADP allocation for 2024-25. Similarly, the education and technology sector will get 13.7 percent of the ADP allocation against the plan's proposal of 16.5 percent.

As experts have noted, education and healthcare are two of the most vital sectors for human development. Despite policymakers—including the prime minister—repeatedly saying that they are putting more focus on these sectors, we hardly see a reflection of their commitments in the development budget. Without increasing investment in the two sectors, the country will not be able to properly develop its human resources. We are already struggling on that front, as evidenced by the number of experts our businesses have to hire from abroad leading to huge amounts of dollars leaving the country. Lack of investment also means that people's out-of-pocket expenditure for both healthcare and education will continue to remain high.

A review report placed before the Planning Commission in January found that out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare in Bangladesh is around 72 percent, which is very high compared to our neighbouring countries including India, Bhutan, the Maldives, Pakistan, etc. There is a clear link between such high expenditures for people and a rise in poverty. Meanwhile, according to Unesco's Global Education Monitoring Report 2022, Bangladeshi families bear 71 percent of the total education expenditure in the country. For fixed-income and poor families, this means a disproportionate burden as well as disparity in the quality of education on offer.

Such inequalities should be addressed through proper government financing in education and healthcare. This is why the lack of sufficient budgetary allocation for the two sectors is a major concern. If the government cannot manage sufficient funds because of financial constraints, it has to come up with innovative measures to address the gap. Additionally, it has to increase the capacity of these two sectors—especially the relevant ministries—to absorb the necessary expenditure and utilise the allocations effectively.

An inexplicable delay by law ministry

Why is it defying HC ruling on removing 'kumari' from Kabinnama?

It is inconceivable why—even five years after the High Court ruled to remove the derogatory term "kumari" from Kabinnama (Muslim marriage deed)—no action has been taken yet by the concerned authorities. The word, meaning "virgin" in Bangla, reduces a woman's status to society's perception of her so-called sexual purity, which is in direct contradiction to her right to privacy and dignity. Its use in legal documents is especially troubling as it leaves room for potential abuse.

In the Muslim marriage deed, a woman is required to declare her marital status and the options in the current form are: virgin, widow or divorced. In 2019, the High Court directed the government to replace "kumari" with "unmarried" within six months of the judgement copy's receipt date, according to a report by this daily. However, that order is yet to be executed. As a result, not only do brides continue to be referred in derogatory terms, but there are instances of husbands and their families taking advantage of the term to file cases of fraudulence and breach of trust against formerly divorced women or widows.

Women in Bangladesh already face a myriad of obstacles in exercising their rights. When it comes to marriages, divorces and alimony, traditional beliefs and practices often put them at social and financial disadvantages. In such circumstances, when the country's legal system stands by women and the HC issues ruling to rectify traditional wrongs, there is no excuse for the executive branch to not follow through.

So why would the law ministry refuse or hesitate to remove "kumari" from Kabinnama? Is its inaction not in contempt of the court? How can it allow the use of an archaic word in this modern age and put women at a disadvantage? The ministry should come up with a reasonable explanation as to why the HC ruling was ignored for so long. It has a responsibility to play a leading role in removing such legal discrepancies and meeting the needs of a progressive society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Food keeps getting costlier

For nearly two years, I have been struggling to provide enough food for my family of six. I have two children and elderly parents, all of whom need to have a complete diet to meet their nutritional needs. But, sadly, the way prices of the most basic food items keep rising every few weeks, it is becoming next to impossible for me to ensure that my family gets three square meals a day. If things continue this way, we may soon have to start starving, because I am the sole earning member in my household, and my income is not increasing to match this inflation. Will the authorities do something about the food prices, or is starving inevitable for me and my family?

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REGULATING DHAKA TRAFFIC

Are 'gate lock' and speed caps all that it takes?



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ZARIF FAIAZ

Whenever it comes to regulating traffic on Dhaka's streets, all the solutions that the authorities come up with somehow seem to miss the mark. The speed limits set last week or the "gate lock" service of buses announced this week are commendable initiatives, no doubt, but they remain rather useless when not coupled with the burning issues that need to be resolved first.

There is no debate that Dhaka's traffic management needs improvement. For years, citizens have been demanding safer roads, better public transport, and the rule of law on the streets of the world's slowest city. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Dhaka commuters are stuck in traffic for 46 minutes every two hours, which leads to a waste of approximately 276 hours a year on average. A 2018 study by Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) found that Dhaka traffic costs the economy about Tk 37,000 crore every year, losing about 50 lakh working hours.

These gargantuan, ominous figures can be brought down drastically just with proper planning fuelled by a little goodwill and understanding from the implementing authorities such as the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). In a city like Dhaka which has a characteristically mismanaged traffic, speed limits on vehicles cannot be the only solution. They can only bring the desired effects when the other elements of the traffic ecosystem are also functioning properly.

What changes will the 40km/h speed limit on cars bring about when there are no lanes on our roads, no proper traffic signals, no bus stops, or virtually no knowledge or respect for traffic laws and rules among the general public? There is no point in blaming the drivers, or the public for that matter. Respect for the rule of law

is as good as the implementation of it. What good would come out of blaming the public when they were never made aware of the rules in the first place?

During the 2018 student-led road safety movement, I remember a bus driver giving an honest interview to a TV channel that exposed the reality of our broken systems. He mentioned that he wanted to follow traffic rules, but he did not know all of them. He

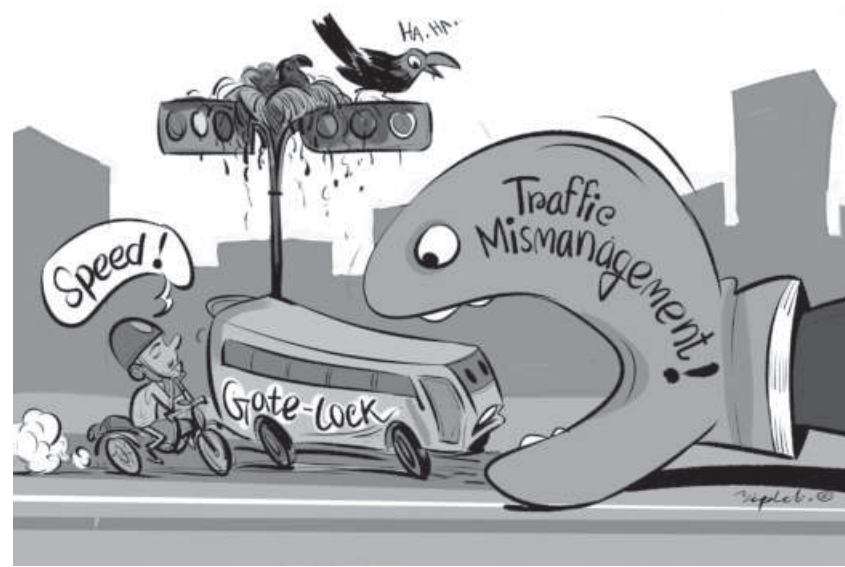


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

said he knew that he must stop when the traffic police signalled him to stop, but he also knew that if he was in a hurry, he could get away with minor violations if he stuffed a Tk 500 note in the sergeant's hand. He knew that he needed a licence to drive, but he also knew that it could be handled with the Tk 500 rule.

Oddly enough, this reflects the reality of the majority of drivers on Dhaka's roads—and not just bus drivers. At the BRTA premises, I once

asked a driving licence examinee if he knew what different lane markings mean on the road. He did not. He passed with flying colours nonetheless, and got his licence the week after. He is now gleefully on the lookout for a two-wheeler in the market, ready to hit the streets in no time.

One wonders if even the BRTA officials or the traffic police themselves know all of the rules. What drives them to ignore the plights of the masses, or even their own? It is certainly not an easy job, handling Dhaka's monstrous and ugly traffic. It must take a physical and mental toll on the cops themselves.

Speed limits are great. They help save lives and make ways for inclusive urban spaces—but in cities that are already well-planned for the infrastructure. The "City 30" model, for example, is showing fantastic results in cities across Europe. In

are implemented strictly with hefty, exorbitant fines that one cannot skip with bribes. In all of these cities where speed limits are becoming popular, citizens are not constantly afraid that these speed limits will be used against them as a trap, to extort bribes on the streets.

A citywide speed limit would have been welcomed in Dhaka had the city been more commuter-friendly. Instead, we fear that the mandatory speed cap will slow down this city further. We have not seen any transparent responses from the city authorities to reassure us either. Little will change unless the authorities decide to go all in, figure out the root causes of the issues, and take the right steps to mitigate them. "Gate-lock" buses or speed caps alone will not solve the traffic problems of this city, neither will a hundred more MRTs and expressways. MRTs and expressways are definitely a step in the right direction, but unless things change on the street level, they cannot efficiently resolve Dhaka's traffic gridlock.

According to the Copenhagen Consensus Center, Dhaka's average traffic speed is 6.4km/h, which by 2035 can dwindle to 4.7km—almost as slow as walking. The frustration of slow movement in this city often results in a mad rush whenever vehicles find an empty stretch of road. We understand that the mad rush needs to be reined in. But the frustration of slow traffic also needs to be addressed. Once we invest in the city's traffic infrastructure and get Dhaka moving, maybe then we can think about speed limits being really effective.

Dhaka has been suffering for too long for something that can be resolved just with the right approach and goodwill. It is important that the authorities implement data-driven traffic management strategies, developed with inputs from urban mobility experts and academics. Educate citizens on traffic laws and regulations, make the driving licence tests stringent, implement the rule of law with hefty fines, and compensate the traffic police division with better pay and healthier work structure. Invest in redesigning the city's public transport system. A liveable Dhaka is not an unachievable dream; we just need to take the right steps.

Why the global dialogue on demographic diversity is critical



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This year marks the 30th anniversary of the landmark International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994. The ICPD was a critical paradigm shift in the field of population and development, where 179 governments adopted the ICPD Programme of Action (PoA) and defined a bold agenda, placing people's dignity and rights at the heart of sustainable development. It emphasised the qualitative aspects of the population and people's rights for the first time, recognising that the goal of development is to improve the quality of life of all people, and the prerequisites for sustainable development are ensuring equal rights of women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and ensuring human rights and dignity of individuals.

In this regard, to stimulate further discussion, engage new partners, and expand the knowledge generation on emerging population issues, the ICPD30 is organising three global dialogues this year. They are: i) "A New Generation's Vision for ICPD," held on April 4-5; "Demographic Diversity and Sustainable Development," on May 15-16; and "Technological Change and the ICPD Agenda," scheduled for June 24-25. These dialogues are crucial for reviving and expanding the ICPD PoA to impact the ICPD agenda beyond

2024 significantly.

The second event, the ICPD30 Global Dialogue on Demographic Diversity and Sustainable Development, begins today in Dhaka, co-hosted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the governments of Bangladesh, Bulgaria and Japan. I feel honoured to have been invited by the ICPD30 Secretariat to participate in this critical dialogue, which will gather global representatives from academia, think tanks, technical experts, CSOs, the private sector and national governments, and will unpack demographic trends, reflect on current and future challenges compared to the world of 1994, offer practical responses, and highlight the development potential of population policies. This dialogue will feature national examples of rights-based, gender-sensitive, human-centred population and development policies grounded in the ICPD principles.

In this regard, as an academic, I have several questions, such as: what were the significant achievements in implementing the ICPD PoA from 1994 to 2024? Have the population-related challenges been adequately addressed in policies and actions nationally (in terms of advocacy, capacity-building, funding, partnerships, South-South cooperation, etc)? Are there institutional, policy, individual, or household-level barriers to

implementing the ICPD PoA? How do we use data to monitor progress regionally, at the country level, sub-nationally, or locally? The composition of the population is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of age, gender, family, education, and ethnicity. Does this increasing diversity pose new policy challenges for tackling social inequality and other disparities? How will the success and challenges of countries and regions be reflected in the dialogue?

Bangladesh has always been considered a critical country in population and development. The 30th anniversary of ICPD allows the country to celebrate and revive the ICPD agenda centred on human rights and sustainable development. The demographic change across countries and regions has increased significantly over the years. For governments to optimise their health, education, housing or infrastructure investments, population change must be understood and integrated into population policy in the post-2030 landscape. The dialogue aims to unpack global and regional population dynamics and diversity, shaping future social and economic conditions. Focusing on individual rights, choices, equality, and quality of life, population and development issues under a changing population dynamics and demographic change should be prioritised, integrated into national development plans and policies, monitored, and evaluated with updated, quality data and good governance.

Undoubtedly, there is much to celebrate, yet significant and multifaceted challenges remain to the ICPD agenda and the SDGs. Since demography will be central to population diversity, new research and policy agendas on the rise

regarding population diversity, health, and family are required. In the labour market, male and female differentiation, social inequalities, health burden, social cohesion, mental health, etc are becoming critical concerns. Population stratification for societal policies is needed. Demographic ageing, lower birth rate, increasing life expectancy, and future pension policy—how do they correlate family, demography, and health? Our social systems may not be as adaptive as we think. Thus, increasing diversity in family forms—care, social security, policy, labour market, caregivers, etc—must be considered.

In November 2022, the world population surpassed eight billion. This is a big number, hence brings forth big challenges as well as big opportunities for change. However, there are concerns over how demographics are changing, with high population growth in some countries and ageing and low fertility in others. We are in a race to finish the ICPD and SDG agenda, but the progress is slow. Thus, more investment in population is required, particularly on three zeros by 2030: zero unmet need for family planning, zero maternal deaths, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices, such as child marriages and female genital mutilation. All three transformative results are essential as a matter of human rights, and as development accelerators.

We have to remember that ICPD is an agenda for everyone. Harnessing the potential of demographic diversity depends on mobilising new actors and involving policymakers, businesses, social movements and others to build social consensus. Let the global dialogue on demographic diversity and sustainable development become successful.