

## Big budget, small impact

Crores spent on dengue control in Dhaka but without satisfactory results

It is unfortunate that despite spending hundreds of crores of taka on dengue control, Dhaka continues to suffer from repeated outbreaks of the disease. Reportedly, in the past nine months, the two city corporations have spent Tk 707 crore—on pesticides, cleaning weeds and water bodies, and equipment purchases—to protect residents from dengue and other mosquito-borne diseases, but have had insufficient results. We have frequently pointed to poor planning and coordination and the absence of a comprehensive policy for the deteriorating dengue situation, but those calls have often fallen on deaf ears. Instead, the two city corporations have continued to carry out their same old mosquito control activities. Experts say that such outdated methods won't work anymore, especially with the changing climate.

When dengue was first detected in Bangladesh in 2000, it was a seasonal disease. Now, it has become endemic, with infections occurring year-round. Therefore, our strategy to fight dengue must also evolve. In this connection, experts claim that targeting Culex mosquitoes is the wrong way to go about it. While Culex breed in dirty water like drains and sewers, Aedes mosquitoes, which cause dengue, breed in clean water around homes, offices, and construction sites. However, these places are difficult for control teams to access, leaving many breeding spots untouched. These areas require targeted interventions. Moreover, experts recommend using larvicides and eliminating breeding sources instead of widespread fogging. They also warn that repeated use of the same insecticides may be ineffective, as mosquitoes have likely developed resistance to them.

Amid such a situation, the two city corporations have proposed their budgets for mosquito control activities for FY2025-26. The DNCC has proposed allocating Tk 135.5 crore for the purpose, with Tk 80 crore set aside for insecticide purchase, while the DSCC has proposed Tk 46.50 crore, with Tk 45 crore allocated for buying insecticides. Since the lion's share of the budgets is spent for insecticide purchases, it is crucial to ensure they procure the right ones, effective against Aedes mosquitoes. Moreover, for better dengue management, we must know the true scale of the outbreak. Currently, the DGHS reportedly collects data from 59 public and private hospitals in Dhaka and 80 district- and divisional-level hospitals, while around 16,000 hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centres across the country provide dengue care. This limited surveillance is inadequate and must be expanded.

We urge the authorities to heed expert advice and adopt a holistic, science-based strategy. Establishing a specialised vector management department with a specialised team of scientists to lead research, monitor mosquito resistance, and guide insecticide use is essential. Without coordinated action, our dengue control initiatives will remain ineffective and fragmented.

## Stop crimes by suspects out on bail

1,108 mugging suspects secured bail in just three months in Dhaka

We are deeply concerned about the trend of suspected criminals being released on bail, raising questions about the effectiveness of police investigations, prosecution, and the overall justice system. According to sources cited by *Prothom Alo*, 1,108 mugging suspects secured bail in just three months in Dhaka. Among them were accused caught red-handed, those arrested after their names surfaced during investigations, those apprehended while preparing for mugging, and even some whose names appeared in the final charge sheets. At a time when mugging has become a constant source of insecurity for many residents, the releases of so many suspected criminals come as a double blow, as freed suspects often return to crime.

This forces the police to chase the same criminals repeatedly, thus not only draining public resources but also emboldening criminals. In the months following the uprising, there has been a surge in crimes amid the security vacuum left in its wake. In particular, mugging, robberies, and violent attacks were frequently reported, with viral videos of such incidents often causing widespread alarm. While subsequent months have seen greater efforts by law enforcement agencies, crimes, especially violent crimes, still persist. In Dhaka, according to court sources, seven people were killed in mugging-related incidents alone between last August and March. Mugging suspects being granted bail only exacerbates the situation.

The question is, why is this happening? Part of the problem lies in weak case-building. Cases are sometimes filed under less severe sections of law, making bail easier. In some cases, suspects are arrested under old cases, giving defence lawyers room to argue for release. Case investigations are also often either weak or slow, with charge sheets in mugging cases taking as much as a year to be filed on average. Moreover, prosecutors often fail to present strong arguments against bail. Even magistrates have pointed out that mugging case files often lack detailed accounts, paving the way for bail. In other words, negligence and procedural lapses on the part of both police and prosecutors are responsible for this situation.

While bail is a right and cannot be denied if a case for it exists, the challenge is to ensure that anyone who is a threat to society does not come out by exploiting loopholes or without supervision. Experts say that correct drafting of charges under the appropriate legal sections, timely filing of charge sheets, and greater efforts from prosecutors can make a difference. We, therefore, urge the authorities to undertake necessary measures in this regard. They must prevent accused offenders from securing undeserved bail or re-engaging in crimes.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Viking 1 launched to Mars

On this day in 1975, NASA launched Viking 1, the robotic spacecraft that would make history nearly a year later as the first successful lander on Mars, touching down on Chryse Planitia.



# How NGOs can help build a democratic welfare state



Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir is professor in the Department of Development Studies at the University of Dhaka.

RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

The political moment following the July uprising has opened a crucial conversation about the constructing a democratic welfare state in Bangladesh. It is the culmination of years of deepening inequality, stagnating wages, and a growing sense that the economy serves a privileged few while leaving many behind. The democratic welfare state is not charity-led, but rights-based, ensuring secure access to basic needs.

The role of NGOs is largely absent in post-July discussions on reimagining institutions. The vast network of economically active NGOs and microfinance institutions (MFIs) holds untapped potential. With 724 MFIs managing a credit portfolio of Tk 1,594 billion and serving 32 million borrowers, these organisations have the reach and resources to reshape markets. This is also true for the food and housing markets.

Oligarchic structures have long dominated food supply chains and property markets. If the state's welfare ambitions are to be substantive rather than rhetorical, economic NGOs and MFIs could be repositioned from primarily providing credit, services and charitable relief to becoming organised and accountable market actors delivering public-good functions, such as stabilised food prices, guaranteed farm incomes, and genuinely affordable housing. However, this should not encroach upon the vital space of civil society organisations engaged in voice, advocacy, mobilisation, and accountability.

### Breaking the oligarchy through cooperative markets

A major driver of persistent inflation is soaring food prices. In June 2024, food inflation reached 14 percent, the highest in a decade, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) reveals that food accounts for 45.76 percent of family budgets, down from 54.81

percent in 2010, but still the single largest share. Farmers, however, receive only a fraction of what consumers pay. The missing value is captured by intermediaries who dominate storage, transport, and wholesale trade.

NGOs could disrupt this system by establishing farmer-owned cooperatives and retail chains. For example, Spain's Mondragon Corporation demonstrates how



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eliminating intermediaries can reduce consumer prices while boosting producer incomes. Its Eroski supermarket chain operates on cooperative principles, ensuring affordability through collective ownership. Similarly, India's Amul dairy cooperative empowered small milk producers to become a unified force by creating village-level collection systems, processing infrastructure, and direct retail channels. Bangladesh's MFIs could work on the triad—producer organisation, shared logistics, and branded retail—for staples like rice, vegetables, and pulses.

Three steps could anchor this transformation. First, NGOs could organise smallholders into legally recognised farmer-producer organisations, enabling collective

bargaining. Second, investments in shared cold storage and transport networks could reduce post-harvest losses, currently estimated at 20 percent. Third, a national digital marketplace could connect growers directly with buyers through MFI-managed escrow accounts. Together, these measures could raise farm-gate prices by 15-30 percent while reducing retail costs by 10-15 percent, striking directly at oligarchic control of supply chains.

### Housing for the many, not the few

Urban land and housing prices in Bangladesh are among the most inflated relative to income in South Asia. In Dhaka, a square metre of city-centre apartment space costs around \$717. For a worker whose real wages have barely moved, this is a mountain

too high to climb. The HIES 2022 shows housing now takes up 10.25 percent of household spending, compared to six percent in 2000. Urbanisation, land speculation and weak regulation have made home ownership increasingly unattainable for most.

Bangladeshi NGOs can provide context-specific schemes following international models. For example, Mexico's INFONAVIT offers micro-mortgages at 4-6 percent to informal workers, breaking the bank-loan barrier. Another viable option is the introduction of rent-to-own schemes. South Africa's People's Housing Process showcases how gradual ownership can be achieved through structured payment plans. Community land trusts represent a third innovative solution. Under this model, NGOs could develop housing

# We need to integrate anticipatory action into disaster management



Fazley Elahi Mahmud is a social protection specialist and international consultant on social protection. He can be reached at fazleyelahi.mahmud@gmail.com.

FAZLEY ELAHI MAHMUD

Technological advancement, as in many other fields, has created new opportunities for managing disasters caused by natural hazards. Bangladesh's Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) can now issue deterministic forecasts, highly accurate predictions of flooding, with a lead time of five days for monsoon floods and three days for flash floods. These forecasts are generated by analysing weather patterns, rainfall, and water flows in major river systems. Localised forecasts are also possible for unions or wards, including analysis of likely hazard impacts.

Such improvements in forecasting capacity create both a moral and practical imperative to act early, rather than waiting for hazards to strike and inflict losses on poor and vulnerable people. Once a deterministic forecast indicates inundation within three to five days in specific areas, actions such as evacuation or the pre-positioning of relief can save lives and protect livelihoods. However, delivering physical relief to remote areas within such a short timeframe remains a major challenge. A parallel technological advancement—mobile money transfer systems—offers a solution by enabling rapid cash support to vulnerable families.

Emergency cash transfers enable families to meet their own needs, such as hiring boats for evacuation, relocating livestock, and storing food and medicine. This form of assistance,

triggered by deterministic forecasts, is known as anticipatory action. It is increasingly being adopted worldwide to help at-risk families take proactive measures to reduce disaster impacts.

Conventional humanitarian response usually begins only after a hazard strikes. Anticipatory action, by contrast, reaches families before a disaster unfolds, offering key advantages. Most importantly, it avoids delays caused by bureaucratic procedures—financial approvals, damage assessments, beneficiary identification, procurement, and transportation—by securing pre-approved financing and identifying vulnerable households in advance. Using mobile money transfers instead of in-kind relief further ensures families receive assistance quickly and directly.

Secondly, small interventions before a shock can prevent major losses. For example, modest financial support may enable a household to move livestock, their main productive asset, to safety. Post-disaster relief may attempt to compensate for losses, but many are irreversible. No amount of aid can undo the suffering of marginalised people, forced to remain in an inundated home, watching their meagre possessions float away as they await rescue.

Thirdly, anticipatory action upholds dignity by enabling households to take protective measures on their own terms, according to their priorities.

In 2024, CARE Bangladesh, in collaboration with the Department of Disaster Management (DDM) and with funding from the European Union, successfully piloted anticipatory action through the project "Scaling Up Forecast-based Action and Learning (SUFAL)." Under this initiative, emergency cash transfers of Tk 7,000 were provided to 1,307

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households 12 to 24 hours before monsoon and flash floods inundated homes across 25 unions in Bogura, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Kurigram, Sylhet, Netrokona, and Sunamganj. An evaluation showed that families used the cash to purchase and store food, buy medicines, protect livestock, hire boats, and take other measures. On average, assets worth over Tk 55,000 were saved per household. For every taka transferred, the estimated return was 12-fold, demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of anticipatory action.

The pilot aligned with the government's Gratuitous Relief (GR) programme in terms of transfer amounts, beneficiary selection, and local government engagement. This alignment provided strong evidence that anticipatory action is both feasible and compatible with existing disaster response mechanisms.

on their land while retaining collective ownership to prevent speculative price increases. The Champlain Housing Trust in the US exemplifies how this approach removes the land from the speculative market, striking at the core of the oligarchic real estate structure. A fourth layer involves public subsidy and infrastructure facilitation, with the government providing land and subsidised credit while NGOs manage the whole scheme.

However, realising such initiatives requires regulatory reforms. NGO-led enterprises providing socially priced goods need a clear legal category that allows them to retain surplus for reinvestment rather than being taxed as for-profit firms. Warehouse receipt systems must be linked to MFI lending so farmers can use stored produce as collateral. Public procurement—from school meals to hospital kitchens—could be tied to NGO-led supply chains, guaranteeing stable demand for farmers and cooperatives.

Housing policy needs to provide land-use concessions, expedited approvals and infrastructure finance to NGO-MFI housing projects, coupled with binding affordability covenants to ensure units built with public support remain affordable.

Given the political economy of rent extraction in Bangladesh, safeguards are essential. Governance frameworks should limit concentration of power, ensure elected boards with producer and consumer representation, require external audits, and mandate transparent procurement and pricing. A public oversight commission for NGO-led market interventions could be set up with representation from the Ministry of Finance, the microfinance regulator, civil society and producers. Bilateral and multilateral technical assistance can be used to underwrite initial investments in systems and capacity while governance norms are established.

These shifts could not only reduce inflation and housing costs but also democratise economic access, advancing the welfare state agenda alongside ensuring price stability. The social contract and actors must be reimagined by turning NGO enterprises into vehicles for collective bargaining, fair pricing, and inclusive development. The road to a democratic welfare state will be neither automatic nor costless without bold collaborations woven through a whole-of-society approach.

Anticipatory action is recognised in Bangladesh's Standing Orders on Disasters (SOD) 2019. In 2024, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief also approved the National Early Action Protocol (NEAP), a guiding document for anticipatory action in response to monsoon floods. However, to scale up implementation, the government must amend the Humanitarian Assistance Programme Implementation Guidelines (2012-13), which currently allow the use of funds only during and after disasters. These guidelines should be revised to permit spending before, during, and after disasters, and to expand anticipatory action through programmes, such as the Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP).

Policy reform must be accompanied by dedicated funding. This includes additional budget allocations for the GR programme and EGPP, as well as financing from the National and District Disaster Management Funds, with necessary adjustments. Importantly, anticipatory action should not divert resources from post-disaster response, which remains essential for large-scale or prolonged crises.

In the longer term, anticipatory action can be integrated into a comprehensive shock-responsive or adaptive social protection framework. This could involve linking it with social protection schemes—such as the old age allowance, disability allowance, and widow allowance—by providing top-up cash transfers to existing beneficiaries, who are among the most vulnerable groups.

Anticipatory action is no longer just an innovation; it is a necessity. With modest policy reforms and dedicated funding, Bangladesh can reduce disaster losses, protect livelihoods, and preserve the dignity of its most vulnerable citizens.