

Dhaka's footpath dilemma

While reclaiming pavements, govt must ensure vendors' livelihoods are protected

The image is familiar in Dhaka: a footpath meant for pedestrians being occupied by a row of makeshift stalls selling everything from mobile phone accessories to fried snacks. Pedestrians, squeezed onto the road, often compete with a torrent of rickshaws, autorickshaws, and buses. The pavement has thus become a marketplace, and the road essentially a pavement. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police's recent eviction drive, launched across Farmgate, Gulshan, Jatrabari, and more than a dozen other areas, is a welcome attempt to reverse this mess. The government has set a one-month deadline for visible improvement. The political will, for now, appears genuine. The question, however, is whether the authorities can continue to keep pavements clear.

Before assessing the merits of the ongoing crackdown, we must acknowledge that street vending in Dhaka is a vast, functioning, self-organised economy. Informal workers account for 84 percent of total employment in Bangladesh. A significant slice of that informality lives on the footpaths of the capital. On a single busy stretch of Farmgate, hundreds of vendors may turn over transactions worth millions of taka each day by selling goods. The supply chains feeding these stalls run deep. Behind each cart lies a wholesaler, a transporter, a smallholder farmer, or an entire household. It is an intricate web of low-margin commerce that keeps a significant portion of Dhaka fed, clothed, and employed. Street vending serves as a critical buffer for rural migrants unable to find formal employment in Dhaka. The pavement, in this sense, is a lifeline for them.

None of this is an argument against reclaiming footpaths. It is an argument for taking seriously the economic shock that evictions inflict. Many of these traders lack the capital for formal retail space, the connections to secure licences, or the savings to absorb even a week's disruption. When their stalls are dismantled, they do not disappear. They return because the footpath is often the only viable path they can afford. The city administrator's promise to "provide alternative spaces" in consultation with law enforcement is promising in principle, but the record of such promises gives little ground for optimism.

Three things are needed if the current drive is to mean something beyond the next news cycle. First, the alternative vendor markets must be in accessible locations and with affordable terms. Second, the monitoring must be institutionalised rather than episodic. The DMP's commitment to "regular monitoring" will be tested not this week but three months from now, when the political spotlight has moved elsewhere. Third, and most ambitiously, Dhaka's urban planning apparatus must begin to treat street vending as a feature to be managed rather than a problem to be periodically swept away.

The city must not leave the question of where its poor workers conduct their livelihoods perpetually unresolved. The vendors will be watching. So will the pedestrians. So, indeed, will the many thousands of families whose daily bread depends on whether the city can clear its footpaths without clearing away their livelihoods.

Business as usual no cure for mosquitoes

Authorities must treat the crisis with the seriousness it deserves

In recent years, a routine call at the start of every summer has been to consolidate early actions to contain mosquito spread so that the threat remains manageable later in the year. Yet, almost every year, mosquito-borne diseases have broken out across the country to varying degrees and with differing effects. This year is no exception. The situation, as we have highlighted in a recent editorial, is steadily worsening, and with it, it is becoming clearer that a business-as-usual approach will not work. What we need is a comprehensive plan that takes into account the evolving nature of the threat and mobilises all relevant state agencies to mount a response befitting a national health crisis.

As experts tell us, the nature of the problem itself is changing fast. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and increasing humidity have created near-ideal conditions for mosquito breeding across much of the country. Research indicates that current temperature ranges are highly conducive to mosquito proliferation as well as the transmission of the viruses they carry. While such climatic shifts cannot be easily reversed, they make well-thought-out human interventions all the more urgent. And this is where Bangladesh is failing, with persistent shortcomings witnessed in mosquito control programmes, urban planning and governance, and public healthcare.

In particular, the state's mosquito control programmes remain fragmented at best, and reactive and insufficient at worst. It is common knowledge now that administrative disruptions over the past two years have undermined routine operations, allowing breeding grounds to flourish. Essential tasks such as drain cleaning, waste removal, and the treatment of stagnant water bodies have not been carried out with the regularity or effort required. While the new government has promised proper measures with many relevant institutions seeing change of guards and methods, their impact has been limited.

The consequences of this sustained gap in enforcement have been visible across the country. Dengue, once largely confined to cities and specific time of the year, has become a year-round nationwide concern. Other mosquito-borne diseases—including malaria, chikungunya, and the potential threat of Zika—are also expanding in scope. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable in this reality, as they don't have the healthcare infrastructure cities do. Meanwhile, the unchecked proliferation of Culex mosquitoes in urban areas also points to persistent failures in sanitation and drainage management. The scale and complexity of the challenge clearly demand a break from the routine response we are still seeing.

We urge the authorities to adopt a coordinated approach to contain the mosquito threat, one that integrates expanded mosquito control operations with effective urban management, waste disposal, and public health preparedness across urban and rural areas. They must treat the problem with the seriousness it deserves.

Renewables are a natural hedge against fossil fuel shocks



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Like the rest of the world, Bangladesh is currently grappling with the geopolitics-led energy supply disruption, described by the International Energy Agency (IEA) as the biggest ever threat to energy security. Four years ago, the country experienced a comparable crisis stemming from the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite that experience, it finds itself the least prepared to navigate the tumultuous situation we are seeing today.

The abrupt supply disruption, owing to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which carries one-fifth of the global oil annually, and suspension of LNG supply from Qatar following a drone attack, has sent a shockwave through the international fossil fuel market, leading to a massive surge in oil and LNG prices. In Bangladesh, high import prices have already raised the energy sector's subsidy burden, tempting the government to draw a loan of \$2 billion from international agencies.

As renewables are capable of providing partial insulation from fuel price volatility, it goes without saying that the country should swiftly expand its renewable energy capacity.

Bangladesh has radically transformed its power sector over the last decade and a half, but without a focus on the urgency of accelerating renewable energy and enhancing energy security. As the country relies more heavily on imported fossil fuels than domestic energy resources, it is now experiencing perpetual vulnerability with a surging fiscal burden.

For instance, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) reportedly approved eight lakh tonnes of diesel purchase from the spot market at an average cost of Tk 169.75 per litre (\$1.38). Since Bangladesh has kept the diesel price fixed at Tk 100 per litre (\$0.81), the spot purchases will result in a revenue shortfall of Tk 69.75 per litre. The monthly subsidy on account of diesel consumption of approximately 375,000 tonnes will soar to Tk 3,100 crore (approximately \$252 million), excluding import duty and the commissions of BPC and traders.

Likewise, Bangladesh's spot purchases of LNG cargoes at an average price of about \$21.79 per million British thermal units (MMBtu) in March 2026 requires an average

subsidy of Tk 67.5 per cubic metre (\$0.55), excluding import duty, terminal and regasification fees. Assuming an average monthly LNG consumption of 25 billion cubic feet, the subsidy burden will rise to Tk 4,774 crore (\$390 million). The \$2 billion loan that Bangladesh has sought will only meet the subsidies for LNG and diesel consumption for just over three months (based on the current prices, three months' subsidies for diesel and LNG are \$756 million and \$1.17 billion, respectively). The subsidies will also rise in the power sector due to the costly furnace oil and coal.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

A protracted Middle East crisis will, therefore, significantly strain the country's energy and power sectors, compelling the government to resort to rationing. This may ultimately lead to an adjustment of tariffs of electricity and different fuels.

However, once implemented, the tariffs of renewable energy projects remain fixed, providing a natural hedge against fossil fuel price volatility in the international market. As a country heavily reliant on imported primary energy, Bangladesh could take this opportunity to swiftly shield itself from the fuel price hikes.

Pakistan offers an example of rapidly scaling up solar energy, thereby insulating itself from fuel price

distributed solar systems across the country. Over the last six to eight months, households and businesses in each village installed rooftop solar capacity of about five to eight kilowatt (kW). Villagers are even taking up rooftop solar projects with battery back-up for mosques. A comparatively high frequency of load-shedding in rural areas is encouraging people to consider rooftop solar systems.

Bangladesh reportedly has 87,230 such villages, which could spearhead a mini solar boom. Apart from households, these villages accommodate schools, colleges, and religious institutions. Solar-powered irrigation could also replace the diesel-run systems. As a rough estimate, an

The country should also motivate people to help spur distributed solar energy projects by offering import duty exemptions on solar accessories and battery storage systems. Thailand, for example, has extended personal and corporate tax exemptions to incentivise investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Bangladesh should urgently draw lessons from its high degree of imported fossil fuel dependence relative to its low share of renewable energy, as this trend is shrinking its fiscal space and making its energy and power sectors unsustainable. It should now swiftly scale up renewable energy that has the potential to free up financial resources.

FROM FUEL QUEUES TO MEASLES CONFUSION

Lessons for our policymakers



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Across Bangladesh, people have been queuing for hours to access fuel, often navigating new documentation and rationing requirements. In some cases, individuals are refuelling repeatedly, fearing future shortages. The government is now preparing to roll out a QR code-based digital "fuel pass." At the same time, enforcement drives are targeting "hoarders" and rationing systems are being tightened. In March alone, authorities reportedly recovered 2.96 lakh litres of hoarded fuel during 3,559 drives and filed 1,244 cases across the country.

While this flurry of government activities is meant to maintain stability with the war in Middle East showing little sign of slowing down, one must acknowledge that the picture that emerges from the persistent queues, administrative bottlenecks and interventions, as well as business and individual uncertainties is one of chaos and suffering. The problem is often being described as one of fuel supply alone. But on the individual level, the issue is also behavioural, driven by expectations, trust, and fear of being left behind.

From a policy perspective, it is

normal for authorities to regulate access, issue directives, and bolster enforcement. But people's behaviour in practice suggests that many are not responding primarily to what the government says, but acting according to what they believe will happen next: whether prices will rise, whether supply will tighten, and whether others will rush ahead of them. In such an environment, hoarding is not irrational. It is individually rational behaviour in a setting of uncertainty and low trust. If people expect others to stock up, not doing so becomes risky. What emerges then is a coordination problem: actions that make sense for the individual but worsen the situation for everyone. Announcements and enforcement do little to change this dynamic because they do not directly stabilise expectations or rebuild trust.

A similar pattern can be seen regarding the ongoing measles outbreak, though the mechanism is different. This is not a conventional case of vaccine hesitancy driven by refusal. Routine measles immunisation in Bangladesh did not suddenly stop. But disruptions in coverage, combined with contradictory public

statements, have created widespread confusion about what actually happened. A senior minister's claim that the measles vaccine had not been administered for the last eight years—later contradicted by immunisation data and officials within the Expanded Programme on Immunization—spread quickly and unsettled parents who had already vaccinated their children. In the absence of clear and consistent institutional signals, misinformation filled the gap. Parents began questioning whether previous doses "counted," whether their children were protected, or whether waiting for clarification was safer than acting. In this context, delay is not avoidance. It is a rational response to conflicting signals.

The issue is not simply about awareness or the lack thereof. It is the fragmentation of belief caused by inconsistent communication and contested explanations. When institutional signals are weak or contradictory, people rely on rumours, social cues, and reigning political narratives.

At first glance, fuel rationing and a measles outbreak may seem unrelated. In one case, people rush to secure fuel. In the other, they hesitate or delay. But the underlying issue is the same. Policy assumes behaviour will follow clear signals: prices, rules, or information. In reality, behaviour follows expectations, trust, and beliefs about what others will do.

Bangladesh has developed relatively strong capacity in designing policies around supply, pricing, and

administration. In fuel markets, attention is focused on imports, reserves, distribution, or stock management. In public health, the emphasis is on access and coverage. But what is often missing in policy circles is a systematic understanding of how people respond. Do citizens trust official signals? Do they expect others to comply? How do they interpret conflicting information? What small frictions delay action? When these questions are overlooked, policies may be well designed on paper but fragile in practice.

There is some irony in calling for an additional layer of policy design while criticising reliance on traditional tools. Yet this shift is already underway elsewhere. Governments in the OECD have established dedicated behavioural insights units to improve policy effectiveness by aligning interventions with how people actually think and behave. Similar approaches are emerging across the Middle East and in other developing countries. These approaches do not replace conventional tools but they make them work better.

Designing better policies in times of crisis is not the challenge, but designing them for real behaviour is. Bangladesh's policy toolkit has helped address many structural challenges. But the problems we increasingly face are not only structural, but behavioural. Until policy begins to engage seriously with how people think, decide, and act, we will continue trying to solve 21st-century problems with 20th-century tools.