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Daily Life Blues

Generational rights and responsibilities towards the environment

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In the lexicon of sustainable development there is an established concept of intergenerational justice and a chain of obligation. Simply put the choices and deeds of today's generation will affect the quality of life of our future generation. The generation inhabiting Bangladesh today has an obligation to the next generation of our citizens; and aptly termed intergenerational justice. The decisions and actions we take today will affect our sons and daughters; the essence of our future. My fellow citizens we beg to ask the question, do we at all care? For example, last week in the popular restaurant road of Banani a construction hopper crane hauling concrete to the top floors for a highrise building under construction crashed and killed three pedestrians below. Surely this could have been prevented. The pedestrians did not have to die, they had an expectation and the right that the construction company and their engineers would have taken adequate precaution around the construction site to ensure that lives of pedestrians are not at risk.

Needless to say the senseless death of garment industry workers due to the lack of enforcement of health and safety regulation is a blemish to our collective moral responsibility. As a society we have an obligation to take anticipatory action to prevent harm to others. The lexicon of precautionary principle must be applied. The burden of proof of harmlessness of an activity be it in the operation of an industry or a construction project does not lie with the general public but lies with the proponent of a particular action. The precautionary principle calls for that before undertaking any action one has the obligation to evaluate one's proposed action and including not taking that action at all. The decision making process has to be transparent, democratic, and taking into account the concerns of the affected stakeholders.

This brings us to the whole issue of unabated ongoing environmental degradation and misuse of scarce resources in Bangladesh. As a society, we keep talking about environmental issues such as over extraction of our groundwater, misuse of natural gas, destruction of wetlands, and industrial pollution. As a society, the harm we are doing cannot be undone by future generations. By our irresponsible actions, the quality of life of our future citizens will be affected. We are failing in our chain of obligation to our future generations. We as a society have to learn to protect and respect the rights of the unborn and the most vulnerable amongst us. Unfortunately we all are complacent and are not good stewards of our environment in Bangladesh. May be it is time for the legal community to take up the cause of the unborn and hold ourselves legally responsible. After all the precedence is there. In the height of the arsenic awareness in Bangladesh, citizens brought lawsuits against British Geological Survey for their negligence and culpability for the arsenic related public health problem in Bangladesh. Are we not as culpable and should we not be held responsible for our actions? We are rightly concerned about global environmental pollution issues such as green house gas emission and its impact on Bangladesh. We in international forums hold the industrialized countries to task, should we not do the same for ourselves. We do have laws in the books, but where we lack is in the enforcement of the enacted laws. Before we reach our local tipping point in terms of environmental degradation and exploitation of resources, a green rapid action battalion should be created to enforce the enacted laws. The enforcing arm could be from the Army Corps of Engineers to support the Department of Environment to enact the laws that are already in the books. The Army Corps of Engineers have trained technical personal who have earned worldwide recognition for their development and reclamation work. The Corps worked under trying conditions in different countries. It is high time that their expertise is utilised in the strategic need of our country, to protect and preserve our environment and manage our natural resources, thereby completing the intergenerational chain of obligation.

The writer is an Environmental Engineer.

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