

## COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Bangladesh is a country having both physiographic and climatic contrasts compared to its small area of 145,000 sq. km. The country's economy depends largely on the use of its natural resources base. Among the least developed countries of the World, Bangladesh's economic growth has been hampered by a lack of economic opportunities and infrastructure. The problems have been further exacerbated by growing poverty and environmental deterioration.

Bangladesh's environmental problems encompass a range of issues that are complex and interrelated. The direct and indirect effects of these problems are reflected in the reduced productive capacity of the natural resources base, lower outputs and income for the majority of the people, a worsening trend in human health and a continued welfare loss, all leading to a high rate of impoverishment.

The major environmental problems are caused by land degradation, deforestation and pollution. Poverty is the root cause of environmental degradation. The absence of a national land use policy and a narrow sectoral approach, have led to land use conflicts, particularly between forestry and agriculture.

The present socioeconomic indicators for the country reveal that it is among the least well-off countries in South Asia and the world. The economy is predominantly agricultural contributing a little over 50 per cent to the gross domestic product. Agriculture's sluggish growth coupled with limited improvement in the industrial sector have resulted in low GDP growth rates. Bangladesh has, therefore, not been able to achieve much economic growth despite a series of development plans since 1972 and an increasing trend in foreign aid. Bangladesh has a per capita income of US\$ 240 per annum.

High population growth rate in a limited territory has become a serious challenge to the development strategy of Bangladesh. This dense living also calls for high standards of public hygiene and very strict environment protection. The health care system in the country is urban based, and on a curative basis rather than rural and preventive in approach. Less than 25 per cent of the doctors serve in the rural areas, while 75 per cent of available hospital beds are in urban centers.

With more than half the population living below the poverty line, Bangladesh is caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and ill health. At any given time, three-quarters of the population (mainly women and children) are ill and malnourished. Almost all rural children are considered malnourished in terms of weight for height ( 10 % wasted and 68 % stunted). The prevalence of parasitic infestation in children under-five is frequently over 85 % which leads to serious nutritional problem. The major diseases resulting from nutrition deficiencies include malnutrition, night-blindness and goitre. Protein deficiency and chronic malnutrition are widespread in Bangladesh. The infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world, as is maternal mortality. The health of women is put at risk by poverty, poor education and discriminatory economic and social practices. Among the poor, women are at a disadvantage from birth because of inadequate nutrition, lack of education, heavy workload, early marriage, and early and multiple pregnancies. Health risks are increased where women, as single parents, are also heads of households.

Rapid urbanization (around 6 % annually) is occurring as a result of high rates of natural population increase in cities, in addition to migration from rural areas. Vehicular pollution is significantly increasing, leading to not only visible pollution from emissions, but also due to lead poisoning since Bangladesh has yet to introduce lead-free petrol. Lack of initiatives on solid waste management specially in urban areas are creating obnoxious odor and

polluting surface and ground water from their leachates. Lack of necessary infrastructure for municipal wastes and sewage remains a major health concern.

The industrial sector in Bangladesh is small, but has potential for growth. Most of the industries do not have any pollution abatement system. Occupational diseases include silicosis, pneumoconiosis, bagassosis, lead and mercury poisoning, lung cancer, hearing loss and skin diseases. Improper chemical use and handling as well as indiscriminate industrial waste discharges pose hazards to human health and the environment.

Modern agricultural practices require the use of large amount of fertilizers, which are washed off into rivers and other surface water streams, seriously disturbing the aquatic ecosystem. Agriculture is not without occupational health risks, of which accidents, infection with diseases spread by animals, and exposure to agricultural chemicals are the most common. In Bangladesh, physical interventions for improved irrigation have been constructed without proper control of disease vectors. This has resulted in increase of lethal and debilitating diseases, including malaria and kala-azar. Cases of pesticide poisoning are increasing usually due to mislabeling, mishandling or poor storage. Illiteracy may also be a factor.

Biomass smoke is the common cause of indoor air pollution inside the mud- and thatched-houses of the rural people. The indoor air pollution is one of the top health-related problems next to safe water and sanitation in our rural population. Maternal exposure to pollutants results in low birth weight and infant ill health. The major categories of health problems related to indoor air pollution are chronic lung diseases, heart diseases, lung cancer and acute respiratory infections, particularly in children.

Social and cultural factors that affect health include low income, limited education, inadequate diet, overcrowding, poor hygienic practices, and social instability and insecurity. Poverty is the most serious threat to health in cities and rural areas alike.

Institutional constraints have always impeded management performance and optimum resource use in Bangladesh, as each line agency pursues its own objectives with little coordination and integration among sectors. The area of environmental health is no exception. More so, as there is no single authority to handle environmental health issues, the confusion is more in this sector. The Ministry of Health similarly has never addressed the issue of environmental health as a separate and specific issue or concern. Any action on environmental health has been the result of other health issues.

There is specific role for both public and private sector when it comes to improving and protecting environmental health aspects in Bangladesh. These two sectors, and the others who impact on environment, are to supplement and complement each other's activities and efforts.

The Government's Fourth Five Year Plan (1990 - 1995) and the draft Participatory Perspective Plan (1996 -2010) describes the Government's environmental objectives as follows :

- \* *control and prevent pollution and degradation related to soil, water and air ;*
- \* *promote environment-friendly activities in the development process ;*
- \* *preserve, protect and develop natural resource bases ;*

- \* strengthen the capabilities of public and private sectors to manage environmental concerns as a basic requisite for sustainable development ; and
- \* create people's awareness for participation in environment promotion activities.

To further these objectives the Government has undertaken a wide range of initiatives, including :

- \* Creation in 1989 of a Department of Environment within a new Ministry of Environment and Forest ;
- \* Approval in May 1992 of a National Environment Policy and Guidelines for an Environmental Action Plan ;
- \* Completion of work on National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP) and National Conservation Strategy and initiation of work on implementation of these two programmes ;
- \* Declaration that Environmental Impact Assessments should be carried out for all major development projects ; and
- \* Enactment of the Environment Protection Act in 1995.

The National Environment Policy sets the policy framework for environmental action, in combination with a set of broad sectoral guidelines. It emphasizes inter alia on :

- \* Maintenance of the ecological balance and overall progress and development of the country through protection and improvement of the environment;

- \* Protection of the country against natural disasters;
- \* Identification and control of all types of activities related to pollution and degradation of environment;
- \* Environmentally sound development in all sectors;
- \* Sustainable, long term and environmentally congenial utilization of all natural resources; and
- \* Active association with all environment-related international initiatives.

The National Environment Management Action Plan is being considered as the basis for concrete programmes and interventions aimed at promoting better management of scarce resources and reversing present trends of environmental degradation. NEMAP is intended to build on the general principles set out in the National Environment Policy by proposing concrete actions and interventions in a number of priority areas.