

# THE BUSINESS STANDARD

## Punishment not enough to reduce air pollution in Bangladesh

The government must gradually phase out the traditional kilns and encourage the use of green technology by making available soft-term financing

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**Pollution caused over 2.15 lakh premature deaths in Bangladesh in 2019, according to a new global study titled *Pollution and Health: a Progress Update*. According to the report, the country ranked sixth among countries seeing premature deaths due to pollution, while India topped the list with 23.57 lakh deaths.**

The constitution of the country has specifically stated that the government should take steps to protect and improve the environment. Although many actions were taken by authorities in the past, the lack of continuity and the absence of tough sanctions have always provided leeway for those harming the environment. In other words, legislative actions were taken to tackle the environmental crisis in Bangladesh, but none have been fruitful so far.

Bangladesh has over 7,000 brickfields, among which 3,000 are located in and around Dhaka, according to DoE data. A 2019 report stated that at least 1 million people are employed by these kilns. Almost 92% of these factories have fixed chimney kilns, which release 6.4 million tonnes of carbon into the air every year, causing severe air pollution.

Over the years, the government has been attempting to reduce these toxins through many interventions. According to media reports, 300 government officers travelled abroad between 2010 and 2019 to learn to identify air pollution and its impacts, funded by the World Bank.

In 2019, a writ petition was filed by the Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB) seeking court directions to implement anti-air pollution rules. Between January 28 and November 26, the court issued several deadline-oriented directives to stop some specific sources of air pollution.



In early 2020, a nine-point directive was issued, including carrying waste and construction materials in a covered vehicle, keeping construction materials at under-construction sites covered, sprinkling water on roads by city corporations, and stopping plying of unfit vehicles.

Moreover, The "Brick Making and Brickfield Establishment (Control) Act 2013" prohibited the establishment of brick kilns in residential, protected, commercial, and agricultural locations and also in forests, sanctuaries, wetlands, and ecologically critical areas. It also provides for trial under the penal code for breach of any provision. However, due to a lack of sanction, monitoring, and proper implementation plan, none of these are followed for a longer duration.

In March 2022, the High Court issued a directive to the government to submit a list of unauthorised brick kilns in and around Dhaka. The court also directed the authorities to close down all such illegal facilities in Dinajpur, Moulvibazar, and Chattagram Hill tracts.

But in reality, that is not possible because according to a UNDP estimate, Bangladesh produces some 8.66 billion bricks a year valued at \$450 million—almost 1% of the

country's GDP. In addition, these kilns employ at least 1 million people, including women and children, and closing down these factories would leave them penniless, and cause a major backlash on the GDP.

The brickfield owners claim that closing down without providing a realistic alternative for continuing their business cannot be a solution for them. Indeed, not providing a viable solution to the businesses is unlikely to bring any positive change in this polluting industry and is likely to encourage corruption.

According to them, the 2013 law did not provide any guidelines about operating the factories without harming the environment. As a result, brickfield owners were not motivated to invest in green technology, which could help them reduce carbon emissions without closing down their businesses. As closing down proved to be difficult, environmental experts have urged the government to encourage the use of green technology.

The government is currently sitting on the Clean Air Bill, a law recommended by the World Bank and drafted jointly by the Department of Environment (DoE) and the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) in 2019. If enacted, this law will impose jail terms and fines for both public and private sector entities if they breach any provision of the legislation.

The Clean Air Bill sets a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment or fine or both for violating the laws governing air pollution. It will not spare public sector leaders, making heads of government agencies liable for punishment if their organisation violates the law.

The carbon emission from brickfields can be reduced through an effective private-public partnership. One such policy is to shift from the use of fired clay bricks (FCB) to hollow concrete blocks (HCB) and interlocked soil stabilised blocks (ISSB) in all public constructions by 2024-25 as ISSB and HCB have lower carbon emission than FCB.

This will reduce the environmental impacts of public construction projects and also influence a shift in the private sector by setting new norms in construction works.

The government must hold dialogues with environmentalists, businessmen, economists, and medical professionals to chalk out a roadmap for the smooth transition of traditional brickfields into modern green-technology-infused factories.

The Asian Development Bank approved two loans totaling \$50 million to Bangladesh for the Financing Brick Kiln Efficiency Improvement Project. The project was formulated as a financial intermediary (FI) loan to support the government by catalysing domestic capital and providing targeted finance to build the energy-efficient brick kiln capacity, thereby enabling the eventual phase-out of inefficient and pollutive fixed chimney kilns.

The government must act promptly in preparing the 6,000 brickfield owners for a gradual shift from traditional to modern brickfields. This includes supporting infrastructural development and providing soft loans for the transformation.

The government must enact a guideline regarding the gradual phasing out of these traditional brickfields and adopting green technology. The guidelines should also include a list of services that authorities will provide in this regard.

This will require a complementary legal and policy framework in which the offenders will be punished but brickfield owners will be supported to go green instead of going out of business or bribing their way out of the system. This will also require partnership with other public and private stakeholders to create awareness, train and build the capacity of brickfield owners, and support them in installing green technology in their factories.

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