

Editorial: ARSENIC AND THE NEW WORLD BANK STUDY

Although scientists and health and water experts have intensified their search for treatment methodologies and reliable alternative sources, it would now seem that not all are purely holistic in their intent because over the years, according to a World Bank study released on April 1 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington DC, the growing arsenic problem has revealed the dangers of groundwater development without consideration of water quality in tandem with water quantity.

If, as the study says, politicians are in a dilemma as they fear promoting another solution that in the long run might be detected to be inappropriate or detrimental, people are in no less a dilemma. Not surprisingly, politicians prefer to promote relatively non-controversial options which include the digging of wells, rainwater harvesting, pond sand filter, installation of deep tube-wells, household water treatment and community water treatment facilities, in spite of their short-term health risks, lack of effectiveness, and low social acceptability among the arsenic-affected people.

Not long after the arsenic problem surfaced we wrote, in our first article on the subject entitled "Searching For Solutions," in which we gave a number of cost-effective options which, had all or any been taken up, might have helped us to manage the problem at little cost but vendors of equipment soon saw the arsenic crisis as a means for making money. Even some researchers saw in it a good opportunity to get funding for their research projects. Undoubtedly research was needed to find out the source of the contamination, but nothing could take precedence over the need to save those falling sick after drinking water from tubewells that were dispensing contaminated water.

But according to the study, the political economy is such that many actors continue pursuing their own interests, not necessarily in a cost-effective manner conducive to solving the issue or to the benefit of those affected by arsenic. It says the arsenic crisis has opened up a new market, not only for NGOs, but also for investors in the water sector. On the other hand, it says, another stakeholder group, donors and international finance institutions, are cautious to deal with arsenic, as they have been under close and serious scrutiny for the quality and effectiveness of the water supply investments in the region. This puts them on the defensive particularly since the lawsuit against the British Geological Survey by some affected patients from Bangladesh has reached the House of Lords where it will soon be heard.

As the World Health Organisation (WHO) said some years back, there is no magic bullet to get rid of the arsenic menace. Now the Bank echoes that statement but instead of echoing such homilies it is far better if the Bank faces the challenge head on. Although we agree this is a challenge not only for the Bank but for the government as well with many of the physical consequences resulting from groundwater contaminated by arsenic now surfacing as a result of the increased use of groundwater from tube-wells for drinking and irrigation, many people now show arsenical skin lesions in the late stages of manifestation of arsenic toxicity.

Arsenic is a cause for various types of cancer ranging from skin, liver, lung and kidney to bladder cancer, therefore if seen from a public health point of view, it is a big headache for the government. However due to the carcinogenic nature of arsenic, the World Health Organisation had issued a provisional guideline for maximum permissible concentration of arsenic in drinking water at 10 micrograms per litre but as the study points out, most developing countries, including Bangladesh, still use the former WHO-recommended concentration of 50 micrograms per litre as their national standard mainly due to economic considerations. Unfortunately at this high standard, those drinking contaminated water face a real risk of succumbing to the poison.

However, if as the study claims, a surfeit of arsenic NGOs (with some honourable exceptions) engaged in arsenic studies, research and mitigation, have been vending some business wares to extract good commerce out of the menace of arsenic contamination, this is deplorable and no words are strong enough to condemn such motives.

The Bangladesh Observer
April 12, 2005