

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



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Environmental Degradation in Kabul

There are serious concerns in Kabul about the debilitating condition of environment and tranquility. Since there has been a sharp and an uncontrolled influx of people in the city, the administration and authorities, in response, have not been able to manage matters. This has given rise to the issues of lawlessness and environmental degradation.

The crimes in the city seem to be increasing and same is the case with traffic jams and traffic issues. There are clear indications that the city is trying to compensate more people that it has the potential of and coupled with that is the incapacity of the government to administer the city properly. The city does not look like a capital city at all, and there are many areas that need immediate attention and speedy actions.

According to Numbeo website, that collects data based on the observations made by the people who visit the site, the level of crime in Kabul city is 77.27, which is high as the score is measure out of 100. Some other scores like, worries about being mugged or robbed (79.17), worries about home broken or things stolen (77.08), worries about car stolen (85.42) and violent crimes such as assault and armed robbery (75.00) are also very high. On the face of these problems, the city administration has no clue about how to manage the issues. Law enforcement agencies, particularly police, have not been able to control the situation properly and they have no strategic approach to counter these issues. Lack of timely justice in the city has further encouraged the criminals and made the situation worse.

The other issue that has remained unattended in the city in the light of increasing population and prevailing carelessness is issue of environmental degradation. City's environment has degraded to an alarming level and people are suffering from different diseases because of pollution. Land, water and air pollution are all present in the atmosphere and influencing the residents. Piles of garbage can be found at different places without proper administration. They remain there for a long period of time and in many cases start releasing toxic material within the environment and many of them are within the residential areas; and many children and animals can be found playing on them.

The situation has been further deteriorated by the absence of a proper sewerage system. At different places within the city, water from drains could be observed overflowing and covering the roads, which are mostly in pathetic condition and further add fuel to the fire. And, if there is a rainfall, the situation gets even worse and many parts of the city are converted into ponds of dirty water.

Air pollution in the city is mostly because of the low quality fuel that is used by the people both for their vehicles and for burning at their homes. A large number of people use petrol and diesel that are smuggled in the city in different ways and there is no quality check on them. While, as most of the people are financially weak, they burn low quality coal and other stuff to keep themselves warm, especially during the winter season. The level of pollution in the air can be best observed during the winter season when smoke covers the whole environment like fog and constitute the air that people inhale. Many observations have shown that the air in Kabul is really dangerous for health and many doctors suggest people to use masks so as to be safe.

Unavailability of clean water is another major problem in the city and it is going to turn into a serious one because of the consistent rise in population of the city. People drink water which they dig out through wells and as the number of wells dug are on the rise, the water level seems to be going down. The issue is further intensified by the low level of snowfall in the city. This year, there has not been any snowfall yet, though a quarter of winter season has already passed. Moreover, the water that is dug out of the wells contains elements that can prove dangerous for health but there is no mechanism to distill that water. And that water is also contaminated in few cases by the wells that are dug for the wastes from toilets. It is really important for the authorities to divert their attentions towards these issues as they are influencing people to an uncontrollable manner. Those members of the society who have the understanding of these grave issues must put pressure on the government to take necessary action. In an encouraging move on Saturday, December 31, Parliament Members (MPs) demonstrated outside parliament building over government's inaction to control the sharp rise in pollution over Kabul city. They mentioned that high level of pollution is causing serious health problems for residents and emphasized that the government must make tangible efforts to deal with the serious situation as it had previously promised.

People as a whole must have awareness about such issues and put pressure on the government authorities to divert their attentions to the matter of providing better living conditions for the people, particularly, a tranquil and clean environment. And, the government needs to realize that if these issues are left unattended they have the potential of becoming more serious than the issue of insecurity.



The International Barriers to Trump's Economic Plan

By Mohamed A. El-Erian

US President-elect Donald Trump should have a relatively clear road ahead at home for the implementation of his economic program: with Republicans holding majorities in both houses of Congress, he seems likely to benefit from a break in the political gridlock that has paralyzed the body for the last six years. But the United States economy does not exist in a vacuum. If Trump is to succeed in delivering the high growth and genuine financial stability that he has promised, he will need some help from abroad.

Trump has established infrastructure investment, tax reform, and deregulation as central components of his strategy to boost the US economy's actual and potential growth. Confident that his plan can unfold as intended, he has set ambitious targets, including GDP growth approaching 4% per year.

For now, investors seem to be pretty much sold. Under the assumption that the incoming Trump administration will ultimately refrain from triggering a trade war, they moved fast to price in optimistic prospects for higher real growth, higher inflation, and more money entering the financial markets. This has enabled the US Federal Reserve to begin to normalize its monetary-policy stance; in addition to a 25-basis-point interest-rate hike on December 14, the Fed has indicated that the pace of such hikes will accelerate in 2017.

As a result, markets seem convinced that the US will gradually exit its prolonged period of excessive reliance on unconventional monetary policy, replacing it with a mix of looser fiscal policy and pro-growth structural reforms – an approach much like that pursued by former US President Ronald Reagan. President Barack Obama sought to pursue a similar approach, but was frustrated by a highly polarized Congress.

The expectation that Trump will have better luck on this front has produced a textbook asset-price response. Stock prices have climbed, led by financials and industrials; interest rates on US government bonds have risen, both on a standalone basis and relative to those in other advanced economies; and the dollar has surged to levels not seen since 2003.

Here is where the rest of the world comes in. Other major economies – namely, in Europe and Asia – may have a much harder time than the US rebalancing their policy mix (which continues to be characterized by excessively loose monetary policy, inadequate structural reforms, and, in some cases, excessively tight fiscal policy).

But if they do not, the Fed's continued interest-rate hikes would stimulate investors to trade their German and Japanese bonds, in particular – which are now bringing low and even negative returns – for higher-yielding US

varieties. The resultant wave of capital flows into the US would push up the value of the dollar even further.

Though the US economy is doing much better than most of the other advanced economies, it is not yet on sound enough footing to withstand a prolonged period of a substantially stronger dollar, which would undermine its international competitiveness – and thus its broader economic prospects. Augmenting the risk is the prospect that such a development could spur the Trump administration to follow through on protectionist rhetoric, potentially undermining market and business confidence and, if things went far enough, even triggering a response from major trade partners.

If Trumponomics is to deliver on its promise, key countries – in particular, Germany (the largest and most influential European economy) and China and Japan (the world's second- and third-largest economies, respectively) – must promote their own pro-growth policy adjustments. They should implement quickly growth-enhancing structural reforms to support monetary stimulus. Germany, in particular, would also need to pursue a looser fiscal policy, while adopting a more conciliatory attitude toward outright debt reduction for beleaguered Greece. Unfortunately for Trump, the rest of the world does not seem prepared at this stage to pursue such a comprehensive policy shift. That is why, beyond advancing Trump's pro-growth economic agenda at home, the newly appointed members of his economic team should be establishing direct contact with their German, Chinese, and Japanese counterparts, with a view to improving international policy coordination.

Germany, China, and Japan have good reasons to embrace such an approach. They are not getting enough out of monetary expansion at this point; the risk of collateral damage and unintended consequences is rising; and pro-growth structural reforms are overdue.

Furthermore, helping the US to achieve healthy and sustainable growth would bring about an indirect boost to their own economies.

And it would help to avoid a scenario in which a Trump administration, under political pressure, would threaten protectionist measures, increasing the risk of a trade war that would hurt nearly everyone.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding Trump's impending presidency, one thing is certain, at least on paper: he is in a strong position to boost US economic growth. He and his team must, however, take the time to dismantle potential international barriers to success. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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The Promise of Digital Health

By Ann Aerts

Africa has changed remarkably, and for the better, since I first worked as a young doctor in Angola some 20 years ago. But no change has been more obvious than the way the continent has adopted mobile technology. People in Africa – and, indeed, throughout low- and middle-income countries – are seizing the opportunities that technology provides, using mobile phones for everything from making payments to issuing birth certificates, to gaining access to health care.

The benefit of mobile technologies lies in access. Barriers like geographical distance and low resources, which have long prevented billions of people from getting the care they need, are much easier to overcome in the digital age. And, indeed, there are countless ways in which technology can be deployed to improve health-care access and delivery.

Of course, this is not new information, and a growing number of technology-based health initiatives have taken shape in recent years. But only a few have reached scale, and achieved long-term sustainability; the majority of projects have not made it past the pilot phase. The result is a highly fragmented landscape of digital solutions – one that, in some cases, can add extra strain to existing health systems.

The first step to addressing this problem is to identify which factors breed success – and which impede it. Here, perhaps the most important observation relates to how the solution is linked to the reality on the ground. After all, technology is an enabler for the innovation of health-care delivery, not an end in itself.

Solutions that focus on end-users, whether health practitioners or patients, have the best chance of succeeding. Fundamental to this approach is the recognition that what users need are not necessarily the most advanced technologies, but rather solutions that are easy to use and implement. In fact, seemingly outdated technologies like voice and text messages can be far more useful tools for the intended users than the latest apps or cutting-edge innovations in, say, nanotechnology.

Consider the Community-based Hypertension Improvement Project in Ghana, run by the Novartis Foundation, which I lead, and FHI 360. The project supports patients in self-managing their condition through regular mobile medication reminders, as well as advice on necessary life-

style changes. This approach is successful because it is patient-centered and leverages information and communication technology (ICT) tools that are readily available and commonly used. In a country where mobile penetration exceeds 80% but only a few people have smartphones, such simple solutions can have the greatest impact.

For health practitioners, digital solutions must be perceived as boosting efficiency, rather than adding to their already-heavy workload.

Co-creating solutions with people experienced in delivering health care in low-resource settings can help to ensure that the solutions are adopted at scale.

For example, the telemedicine network that the Novartis Foundation and its partners rolled out with the Ghana Health Service was a direct response to the need, expressed by health-care practitioners on the ground, to expand the reach of medical expertise. The network connects frontline health workers with a simple phone call to consultation centers in referral hospitals several hours away, where doctors and specialists are available around-the-clock. From the outset, the project was a response to an expressed need to expand the reach of medical expertise, and was fully operated on the ground by Ghana Health Service staff, which made this model sustainable at scale. To realize the full potential of digital health, solutions need to be integrated into national health systems.

Only then can digital technology accelerate progress toward universal health coverage and address countries' priority health needs.

Collaboration across the health and ICT sectors, both public and private, is essential. Multidisciplinary partnerships driven by the sustained leadership of senior government officials must guide progress, beginning at the planning stage. Intra-governmental collaboration, dedicated financing for digital health solutions, and effective governance mechanisms will also be vital to successful strategies. Digital technologies offer huge opportunities to improve the way health care is delivered. If we are to seize them, we must learn from past experience. By remaining focused on the reality of end-users and on priority health needs, rather than being dazzled by the latest technology, we can fulfill the promise of digital health. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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