

## Bangladesh Bank oblivious to coronavirus

Why is there no emergency plan when we are in an emergency?

At a time when central banks around the world are taking a whole host of precautionary measures and the world economy as well as all individual economies are under significant duress due to the coronavirus pandemic, it's astounding that our central bank is yet to even consider what actions it could take should the situation worsen. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the global economy is set to lose USD 2 trillion due to the outbreak. Bangladesh, like all other countries, is also in the firing line and its economy will surely experience significant losses. Why then is its central bank so relaxed?

The US Federal Reserve already slashed its interest rate to essentially zero on March 15 and launched a massive USD 700 billion quantitative easing programme to shelter the economy from the effects of the virus. And in the UK, the Bank of England had earlier slashed the rates by 50 basis points, and on Tuesday, the British Chancellor unveiled a 350 billion pounds lifeline for the economy. Meanwhile, what has our central bank done? Nothing!

There is no logic to explain why the central bank has doped off like this. It is not like Bangladesh's economy is not at any risk from both external and internal factors. In fact, Bangladesh already has a weak banking sector riddled with huge amounts of non-performing loans. This means that any major external shock such as the current outbreak and the resulting bleak global economic outlook could send the sector spiralling into a liquidity crisis, especially in the absence of any policy support from the central bank.

The fact that this is not obvious enough for the central bank to have already formulated a strategy is shocking. How the authorities failed to see that it needs to have a policy in place, at the very least to instil people's confidence in the economy, is beyond us.

We call on the authorities to immediately begin working on different contingency plans to ensure that the central bank can support banks and businesses that might suffer losses due to the global pandemic. And we would also advise the bank to consult with experts and different stakeholders so that any emergency plans that it does formulate can withstand the various challenges that may arise in these uncertain and unpredictable times.

## Grants to support women in STEM laudable

Let's address the gender imbalances and biases in these fields

In these uncertain times, we are heartened by the news that the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr) will award grants worth USD 400,000 for women researchers and scientists, in commemoration of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This fund is expected to support eight to ten projects by Bangladeshi women scientists, researchers, academicians and students below the age of 50. We laud this initiative to ensure and enhance women's representation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and look forward to seeing more such initiatives to rectify the gender imbalances and biases in these fields.

Despite the tremendous progress made by women and girls in breaking glass ceilings and patriarchal mindsets over the decades, they continue to be underrepresented in these crucial fields, reinforcing the patriarchal notion that hard sciences are more suitable for men than for women. While it is encouraging to see that more and more young women and girls are not only taking STEM subjects but doing exceptionally well, the drop-out rate for women is still much higher than men, especially as we go up the ladder. Women in STEM have identified some key barriers that limit their entry and success in these fields, including lack of grants and funding, lack of mentors and role models, unequal pay for same skills, gender stereotypes and deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets, lack of adequate laboratory space and sexist work environments, among others.

Grants such as these can go a long way towards solving some of the institutional barriers outlined above, and help create a new generation of promising women researchers and scientists who can subsequently become role models and mentors for young girls across Bangladesh. Institutional support for women can also gradually change social mindsets as women researchers and scientists become more visible and appreciated for their commitments and contributions to society.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Closures, not vacations

Educational institutions nationwide have shut down along with multiple offices, but that does not necessarily mean we will be having a great time like we usually do during the summer or winter vacations. This is more of a precautionary measure. I am glad that the government has taken such a step.

However, I have noticed that many people are still unable to grasp the magnitude of the pandemic and are roaming around care free. Unless it is an emergency, everyone should avoid going outdoors. Another worrying aspect is the lack of awareness amongst the underprivileged community. I have seen many beggars in the last few days, and one reason they stand out more now is because they have no masks on unlike the general public. I think the authorities must come up with an immediate plan to inform them about the seriousness of the virus as well as the steps that they need to take to ensure their wellbeing, and if possible, provide them with a mask. May the Almighty protect us all.

Md Saifur Rahman, Rampura, Dhaka

# Emergency preparedness in the education sector



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE closures of academic institutions for two weeks in response to the Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the globe have caught many of us involved in the academia by surprise. The immediate

purpose of the suspension of classes is to ensure social distancing by discouraging our young ones from physically gathering in a crowded place. The intention to stop the novel coronavirus from spreading is noble. However, in all probability, the moratorium is going to be prolonged, and the end is not in sight. All of a sudden, many working parents do not know what to do with the mischief-making adorable little humans in their houses during the daytime. Many teachers do not know how to compensate for the lost time and finish their lesson plans on time. Many students do not know how to negotiate with this unexpected isolation.

For the most, one thing is certain: it means missing classes altogether. Some of the private universities tried to switch to online platform trialling e-teaching. My institution, ULAB, has been using a learning management system—MOODLE—for the last five years or so. We have mostly used it as a supplementary platform for in-class teaching. In response to the closures, we initiated an emergency management protocol and decided to migrate to e-teaching with an aim of delivering lectures, uploading learning materials, and assessing learning progress online. Our faculty members were enthusiastic; many were pro-active enough to adjust and adopt. The response from our students, however, was an eye-opener. It gave us a rare insight into the psychosocial behaviour of our students as well as the lack of nationwide e-structure to support off-campus online teaching. Our tiny effort is a pebble in the pond, and the waves have reached many shores, exposing a critical gap in our broader education sector that lacks emergency preparedness.

The unofficial Facebook page of our university is crowded with comments from students who have gone back to their hometowns or villages where they reportedly do not have regular access to the internet. Many of them do not

have PCs, laptops or smartphones. Even if they do, they do not have the speed and bandwidth to connect with a live classroom. They are worried about having uninterrupted power supply during a real-time examination. Printing, scanning a document, uploading assignments within a given time are concerns shared by our students. In our response, we tried to remain flexible, offering both synchronous and asynchronous services in multiple avenues and platforms. At the same time, we have realised that our students are the microcosm of a system that screams inadequacy. I am sure many of the students are presenting the problem as larger than it is to skip exams or classes as they are used to equating closures with vacation. Add to that the

to prepare the course contents in a way so that the human side of a teacher remains intact. Students must feel the warmth of a teacher even while attending a virtual classroom. A teacher can show the warmth by intuitively placing herself/himself in the shoes of the learners, explaining what is expected of a student, and making the learning experience pleasant.

Having conducted many teachers' training courses for intermediate and graduate level teachers, I know the banality of my supposition above. Our peripheral schools and colleges are yet to make digital experience central to their pedagogical practices. The ICT in Education Masterplan Review 2019 prepared by Unesco, which is available on the website of the Ministry of Education,



We need a national contingency plan for the education sector which may go beyond fire drilling or natural disasters.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

genuine resilience against a system that is new. Still our hiccups suggest a mal-digested education system that is currently in place.

A survey done in the US shows only nine percent of educators are comfortable in teaching in a completely online environment. One suspects, in our culture, the number is going to be significantly low among those who have been solely exposed to bricks-and-mortar classrooms. For many of the old-school teachers, a virtual classroom where it is difficult to pick up the non-verbal cues of students (e.g. whether they are bored or excited, confused about a topic, shy to ask a question, etc.) robs us of the fun of teaching. Then again, good teaching is good teaching. The challenge for us then is

may tell you that there has been a significant progress in the incorporation of ICT in classrooms. This simply involves equipping schools with computers and multimedia projectors. Whether they are properly being used is a different issue. While I was teaching the teachers how to make their classes interactive and to apply blended learning, my trainee teachers told me that, in most cases, the projectors in their institutions were locked in the rooms of the principals. A teacher can issue the equipment at her/his own risk, giving written assurances that she/he will be responsible for any damage as the institutions do not have any maintenance budget. This is symbolic of how our digital progress is contained. The equipment lies in a box, nipping any possibility of thinking-out-of-the-box in

## WHO'S CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

# A wake-up call or missed call?

MOHAMMED PARVEZ IMDAD

WE are passing through critical times. The world has never seen such gloom and uncertainty since the World War II. Despite its technological progress, especially in medical sciences, the global community has been gripped by fear and concerns about whether it would be possible to eliminate COVIT-19, the most dangerous enemy of humanity in contemporary times. The intensity, ferocity and toll of this virus present an enormous challenge to human advancement as normal and routine activities worldwide have come to a standstill. The monetary, social and environmental costs are mounting up to scales beyond perception.

If this trend is not checked or reversed within a couple of months, the social and economic progress of countries and regions will be impeded. It will adversely impact business and trade while GDP growth will slacken in several countries in the near to medium term. Governments will have to concentrate on mobilising a huge amount of additional resources to compensate wage costs and subsidise sharply declining output in key sectors.

Were there possibilities to identify and control this crisis at the preliminary stages? We will have to find an answer to that. But any citizen of the world may ponder whether the key international organisation mandated to look after human health, World Health Organization (WHO), has done its "homework" right over the past several years. We are aware that the WHO emerged as a specialised agency under Article 57 of the UN Charter. Its stated objective is "attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health." Further to this, I would like to draw the attention of all concerned to the following clauses of Article 2 (relating to the functions of WHO): 2(c) "to assist Governments in strengthening health services"; 2(g) "to advance work to eradicate epidemics, endemic and other diseases"; 2(k) "to propose conventions, agreements and regulations, and make recommendations with respect to international health matters," etc.

Keeping the above in view, citizens have valid questions on whether the WHO has been able to achieve its targeted strategic and functional objectives, and deliver in accordance with its given mandate. The WHO has been working

for over five decades and has produced some results in the past. However, since 2000, the WHO appears to have faltered in delivering the expected level of outputs, presumably due to capacity constraints and managerial inefficiencies. It is indeed relevant to raise these issues, as it appears lessons have not been duly derived from past experiences in handling similar infectious diseases and epidemics.

The following issues warrant careful attention and extensive discourse at this stage: (1) Different countries and regions were confronted with at least eight types of serious virus in the past two decades (e.g. Ebola, SARS, MERS). Based on the

improvements, what has the WHO done to ensure adequate technical support and efficient coordination on these matters? (5) If there are concerns about a similar virus spreading even years from now, does the WHO have a strategic vision to ensure the world does not suffer like this again? (6) Member-countries have substantially increased contribution to the WHO to ensure effective outcomes and impact. Will the WHO clarify what proportion of this was utilised for research and development thrusts? (7) Will the WHO confirm whether its regional offices in East and Southeast Asia took appropriate actions on first hearing of the outbreak of

about the disease detection programmes it is undertaking to address the current critical challenges; (2) work closely with national health institutions both in the public and private sectors to strengthen multi-sector institutions and platforms; (3) support achieving concrete outcomes on strengthening forecasting, monitoring, evaluation and surveillance; (4) encourage advancement in community-based approach to risk mitigation and fast-track response to minimise losses; (5) coordinate more effectively with the private sector and regional health institutions to determine rapid response to the sudden outbreak of infectious diseases; (6) strengthen formal and informal approaches and processes within countries to accelerate precautionary inputs, facilities and services.

In addition to the above, the WHO should give regular updates on the progress of developing vaccines, stages of the coronavirus pandemic and its much-expected subsequent downgradation within weeks.

SAARC leaders have just agreed on an Emergency Fund as well as intensive consultation and coordination among governments, private sector and health experts to fight the virus. The WHO should come forward to support regional initiatives similar to this. A Special Session of the UN Health Ministers or WHO Governing Board should be convened as soon as possible to give directions on WHO programme effectiveness and sustainability. The UNGA in September this year could consider an updated Program of Action for the WHO's enhanced effectiveness in the coming decade. The UN's priority intervention is called for as the prolonged impact of Covid-19 would weaken the UN's focus on development effectiveness and SDG targets.

The WHO announcement about Covid-19 being a pandemic requires immediate follow-up actions. The WHO should urgently spell out short and mid-term programmes, which should involve further transparency and accountability, as well as their overall effectiveness and sustainability. One just hopes it is not too late for the WHO to treat this as a wake-up call. Better late than never. Certainly, it should not be a missed call.

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WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attends a news conference on the coronavirus (COVID-2019) in Geneva, Switzerland, on February 24, 2020.

experiences in controlling those viruses, did the WHO take protective and pre-emptive actions to identify the nature of these virus-related infections, so as to remain prepared for facing probable critical situations in the future? (2) What did the WHO do to strengthen medical monitoring, surveillance and impact evaluation based on past experiences? (3) How effectively are the WHO country programmes aligned with the respective country health programmes in terms of preventive mechanism, risk mitigation, intensive community platform and broader stakeholder engagement? (4) Given realistic scenarios in which country health systems or regional health arrangements need further stimulus or

the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China? (8) Will the WHO consider exclusive window for responding to critical needs and undertake vulnerability assessments well in advance to enable countries cushion cross-border virus shocks? These questions and issues are not aimed at putting the WHO in the dock, but to trigger fast and effective actions to control the Covid-19 on the one hand, and, on the other, to chart a focused Plan of Action to give further support and momentum to country health systems in combating the current menace. In moving ahead to do justice to their mandate and meet human expectations, the WHO is advised to undertake the following: (1) keep member-countries informed