

Coronavirus pandemic: Are we (mis)managing it?



I ’M panicked, as is everyone around the world now. We’re faced with an existential threat. A death sentence hovers over us as it has hovered over Wuhan, China, since December 2019. The potential killer is a virus, COVID-19.

The virus causes respiratory illness (like the flu) with symptoms such as cough, fever, tightness in the lungs, and in the most severe cases, pneumonia. As of March 26, 2020, at least 18,589 people globally have died from COVID-19, while more than 4,14,686 people have been infected in at least 197 countries and territories, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). And the virus is still spreading apace, infecting and killing more people worldwide.

Its spread must be contained by avoiding contact with an infected person. The WHO in the meantime has declared this crisis as a pandemic. People around the globe were feeling increasingly anxious and vulnerable, and so their governments have tried to react to ensure their safety.

Now this pandemic has created serious paranoia. Xenophobia, isolationism, and distrust have erupted. Governments around the world are declaring curfews and emergencies, locking down cities and territories, sealing off borders, closing schools, cancelling flights, and restricting the movements of their citizens. No one seems to mind living a primitive life in a postmodern world. Safety matters. The culprit that causes the disease is contagious. It calls for “social distancing.” As the virus crosses borders, it seems to have been getting more deadly—in China, the death rate is 3.98 percent, whereas in Italy, it is 8 percent. In Bangladesh as of March 26, five out of the 44 people reported to have been infected have died. The death rate is high here—11.36 percent. People need to be informed and cautioned. And where needed, they must be isolated and quarantined. That’s what the experts suggest.

If, however, history can help deal with this pandemic, we perhaps would act differently to curb the spread of the virus. Our species has suffered from pandemics throughout the various phases of history. Stopping people’s movements has never seemed to stop a pandemic, as Yuval Noah Harari

implied in an op-ed in the *Time* online magazine on March 15, 2020. In the 14th century, he claims, there were no airplanes and cruise ships, and yet the Black Death spread from east Asia to western Europe in little more than a decade. It killed between 75 million and 200 million people—more than a quarter of the population of Eurasia. In England, four out of 10 people died. The city of Florence lost 50,000 of its 100,000 inhabitants. In March 1520, a single smallpox carrier—Francisco de Eguía—landed in

as 100 million—in less than a year. These examples show that viruses will find ways to reach east and west, rich and poor, ghettos and chateaus. We must ensure our safety, but when safety measures are driven by fear, they are hardly effective.

In no way do I mean to downplay the seriousness of our pandemic. The threat is real, and the worst is looming. As a language teacher, however, I sometimes wonder whether we could shift to more sober tones to inform and warn about the

they might stoke xenophobic and racial rant. We already had some unpleasant examples around. Insensitive and inappropriate language indicates irrational thinking. When the chips are down, irrational thinking reflected in language is an expensive option. It leads to behaviour that might compound the crisis further.

For example, the Dhaka that I grew up in is not the Dhaka it has become since the first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 8. I love Dhaka with an absolute passion

People are hoarding food. The prices of essentials have spiked in the city. And what happens in Dhaka doesn’t remain in Dhaka. It spills all over the country. So, the rest of the country is catching up and caving in to the panic and propaganda. Politicians, bureaucrats, and health officials have started to blurt out “lockdown”. In fact, “lockdown” has already become a buzzword in dealing with COVID-19 around the world.

Under such a circumstance, information management is critical. Panicking is not the solution. Proper information is. But because of the ubiquity of social media, misinformation and propaganda are endemic. Myths and superstitions override facts and science. Fear mongering creeps in. With the COVID-19, the prophets of doom are treated as if they are the most authentic scientists and saviours here in Bangladesh and elsewhere. People are being brainwashed to believe that the virus is race-, religion-, and colour- (of skin) specific. That’s rubbish!

While “isolation” and “lockdown” seem to ensure safety, they also push some people to the edge of vulnerability—a rickshaw puller, for example, lives from hand-to-mouth. Social mobility—his and others’—makes possible his skimpy income. If he stays home, he might have to starve along with his family. So, perhaps, might a day-labourer or a cab driver or a street vendor. “Lockdown” seriously strains any economy and affects everyone. But the marginal income groups are the first and worst victims. In a developing country like ours, we can’t afford to follow Canada’s precedent of announcing a USD 82 billion plan to stand by its citizens under any circumstance throughout this pandemic. Neither can we afford to do nothing. If the tough times stay with us for longer than we are hoping, we must have some contingency plans, so the worst victims can weather this crisis. If, under any circumstance, people have to go hungry for some time, they may go crazy. And they might threaten and undermine any management initiatives.

This pandemic has reached our shore a little later than it did those of other nations in the world. It’s too early to predict whether we’re managing it well or not. This much is sure, though, our management efforts need rethinking, revamping, and much more serious attention to the implications of the language we use to talk about it.

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Dhaka is now a different city altogether. With educational institutions, offices, shops, and cinemas closed to slow down the spread of coronavirus, its roads are almost empty.

PHOTO: FEROZ AHMED

Mexico. By December, a smallpox epidemic devastated the whole of Central America, killing according to some estimates up to a third of its population, when Central America had no trains, buses or even donkeys. In 1918 a particularly virulent strain of flu managed to spread within a few months to the remotest corners of the world to kill tens of millions of people—and perhaps as high

pandemic. The wide circulation of such terms as emergency, isolation, quarantine, and curfew are, I’m afraid, coarsening our civil discourse. All these terms press on the panic button, because these are usually the language of hospitals, police stations, and the military. They smack of disease, crime, and dictatorship. If these terms continue to resonate during and following the pandemic,

despite its choking traffic, toxic pollution, and deafening cacophony. It has morphed into a city that has lost its essential vices. It looks abandoned and spooky. Lest they infect or might become infected with the virus, the easy and outgoing people of the city stay home. When some of them come out, they go straight into the grocery stores. They buy stuff like maniacs.

Will the UK’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme be a success?

C RASHAAD SHABAB

THESE are extraordinary times and the UK government has announced an extraordinary set of economic policies in response to them. Perhaps the most radical among these is the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, a promise to pay employees 80 percent of their wages up to 2,500 pounds per month, provided that employers furlough these workers, rather than making them unemployed. The implementation of this type of policy in an economic crisis represents nothing less than a long overdue revolution in the UK’s handling of adverse macroeconomic shocks and contrasts sharply with the policies adopted by the country in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, successive UK governments embarked on a ruthless and sustained attack on the welfare state in a now infamous programme of austerity. The so-called economic justification for this programme was rooted in a false equivalence between households and the macroeconomy. According to this flawed logic, because a household in financial distress is obliged to reduce its expenditure, so too should an economy. But unlike a household, in an economy each participant’s expenditure is another’s income. Thus, when a government embarks on a programme of austerity during a crisis, it reduces incomes

and output even further in a vicious cycle that multiplies the negative effects of the initial economic shock.

In contrast to what many professional economists regard as misguided policy choices post-2008, the current offer of wage support will almost surely mitigate the negative economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on households that would otherwise have suffered from unemployment. In other words, wage support is appropriately targeted as it will benefit the very households which would have been forced to cut their expenditure levels and so would have contributed to a vicious macroeconomic cycle of low expenditure begetting lower income, and so on. If the experience of 2008—when businesses which received cash injections tended to hoard them rather than spend them—were anything to go by, policies that put money in the pockets of vulnerable workers are more likely to mitigate economic disruption than if equivalent funds were disbursed to businesses.

Supporting expenditure levels during the crisis itself, however, is only one of the beneficial effects of a wage support policy in a time of crisis. Another is that it may help to keep a severe, but short-term economic disruption (in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, which most experts expect to last a matter of months) from turning into a more prolonged recession with persistent and

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high levels of unemployment (that may drag down living standards for years to come). This property of the current UK policy is down to the proviso that to be eligible for the payment workers must be furloughed, but not dismissed.

To understand the full implications of this stipulation, we must be clear on how economics conceptualises jobs. Each job is a match between an employer and a worker. A good match allows a worker to perform at a level that is close to her or his productive potential. Under normal economic conditions, over time workers leave (or are obliged to leave) bad matches to form better ones, improving overall productivity and aggregate output. Productivity may

also improve in matches that are stable over time as workers adapt to the culture of an institution and acquire job-specific skills through learning by doing. A major danger from the economic contraction necessitated by policies to contain the current pandemic is that these temporary measures may induce long lasting damage to productivity by breaking otherwise stable and productive pairings between employers and employees.

If these pairings were broken because workers had been laid off, then even after the acute threat of the virus had passed, workers would have had to spend time and effort searching for jobs to which they are appropriately matched. During this time, unemployed workers would have no income (except benefits payments) and would therefore have less purchasing power than they did before the pandemic. In turn, relatively depressed demand would make jobs scarcer and thus more difficult to find. Over time, unemployed workers may become deskilled or discouraged from job search so that some do not return to productive employment, even in the longer term. Thus, a temporary economic downturn can have a sustained effect on the unemployment level.

If, on the other hand, workers are furloughed during the months in which business is restricted, the job retention grants enable them to sustain their expenditure levels. Then after restrictions are eased, they will be

able to return to their jobs relatively quickly. They will again demand goods and services to much the same extent as they did prior to the pandemic and the persistent effects of the pandemic on unemployment would be smaller than they would otherwise have been.

Of course, policies such as this are expensive in the short term and taxpayers have a right to ask if the expense is worth the benefit. The *Financial Times* estimates that over the three-month duration of the current policy, it will cost 3.5 billion pounds if 1 million workers avail it, while the well-respected Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that it will cost 10 billion pounds if 10 percent of workers in the UK economy are affected. However, if the policy is successful in shortening the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic by preserving jobs and purchasing power, the UK government is likely to recoup a substantial part of the current expense in the form of tax revenue that it would otherwise have lost due to the fall in incomes that would accompany a prolonged downturn. But perhaps even more importantly, in a time of crisis, it is the job of governments to ease the hardship inflicted on vulnerable workers. It just so happens that in this case it is also the economically prudent thing to do.

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ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

TERRACOTTA ARMY DISCOVERED
March 29, 1974

Farmers drilling a well near Xi'an, China, found a subterranean chamber that led to the discovery of the terra-cotta army, 8,000 life-size terra-cotta soldiers and horses in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Assesses
6 “Understand?”
11 Grownup
12 Without others
13 “Forgive me, Father” list
15 Before, in poems
16 Grammys category
17 Whole bunch
18 Blushes
20 Stunned wonder
21 Fishing pole
22 Asterisk
23 Message systems
26 Young kangaroos
27 Over again
28 Old card game

29 Scoundrel
30 Bruise
34 “-we there yet?”
35 Tell tales
36 Arthur of “Maude”
37 Losing candidates’ speeches
40 Modify
41 Make blank
42 Glossy
43 Completely full

DOWN
1 Indy entrant
2 Love to pieces
3 Ready to play
4 North Pole worker
5 Sound systems
6 Shocked sounds

7 Yale student
8 Not in time
9 Not at all
10 Perfume counter bottles
14 Dune makeup
19 Sketched
22 Chimney grime
23 Venezuela’s capital
24 Succeeding
25 Cold War easing
26 Family to keep up with
28 Clark’s colleague
30 Store worker
31 German sub
32 Good judgment
33 Moved slowly
38 Horseshoe shape
39 Nest egg ecct.

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S	A	B	E	R	P	A	R	K	
C	R	A	V	E		A	L	E	R
R	O	S	E	S	P	A	T	I	O
A	M	I	C	E		I	N	S	
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S	E	W	S			S	P	E	N

BETTE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott