

Confronting Covid-19: Lessons from other nations

This is the first article of a two-part series. The other part will be published tomorrow.

Farmers should be given full support

Collective effort to avoid a famine is what we need

In her speech on April 20, the prime minister warned about the possibility of a global food shortage due to the coronavirus if steps are not taken in the right time. We welcome her decision to pre-emptively warn everyone of such a grave possibility and hope it will be taken seriously by all stakeholders.

As this newspaper reported on April 21, the PM emphasised on the need to produce and preserve food to overcome any possible food crisis in the post-coronavirus world. She urged farmers to use all the available land in the country to grow crops and asked law enforcement agencies to cooperate with them. In that regard, it is essential that farmers are given all the help they require. That includes financial assistance to help them hire helpers to harvest crops, get machinery, etc. The financial institutions should be instructed to provide farmers with low-interest loans, and ensuring there is enough storage space for their food produce is also key.

Last year, we witnessed a massive debacle in procuring rice from farmers, many of whom had to endure losses after being forced to sell their produce at very low prices. The government must ensure there is no repeat of that, and its decision to purchase a significant amount of Boro paddy directly from farmers does indicate that it has somewhat learned from its previous mistake. Corruption has always been a huge problem when it comes to the agriculture sector. And the government needs to be stern in its action against those who try to benefit at the cost of farmers or others, particularly as we are currently in a crisis period.

Paddy harvesting has already started and more food grains will be produced in the near future. Therefore, it is essential that farmers get the assistance they need as soon as possible. With the right steps, we agree with the PM that a famine-like situation can be avoided and everyone now needs to work towards that.

Making people stay at home

Awareness and strict enforcement of govt. directives are the key

It is most unfortunate that many amongst us have taken the directives given by the government to stay at home and maintain social distancing very lightly, despite the fact that the numbers of new infections and deaths from Covid-19 are increasing every day in the country. Although law enforcers and even army officials are on the ground to ensure social distancing, people are still coming out of their homes and gathering at local bazaars and streets without maintaining safe distance from one another. Amid such a situation, as the government plans to extend the shutdown by at least a week, we think it should also consider taking some extra measures to make people stay at home.

Raising awareness among people about the probable disastrous impacts of social gatherings at this time is key to keeping them housebound. In the capital, where the infection rate is much higher, the two city corporations can play a crucial role in this regard by engaging the ward commissioners and councillors. The public representatives across the country should also play their part.

Moreover, the role of the law enforcers is of critical importance here; they have to be as tough as needed to enforce the shutdown. We expect them to take harsher measures in the worst-hit areas. Besides, the government's relief and other efforts to help the poor people should also be carried out following social distancing guidelines. The authorities' decision to keep Karwan Bazar, one of the largest kitchen markets in Dhaka, closed for retail sales as a means to contain further spread of the virus is commendable. Decisions should also be taken about the other kitchen markets in the city which are still crowded by people.

As many of these issues were discussed at a high-profile meeting of the Cabinet Division on Tuesday, we are hopeful of seeing more organised efforts from the government—from raising awareness to enforcing shutdowns, from preparing the hospitals to treat the Covid-19 patients to ensuring high-quality PPEs for doctors and medical staff—to deal with the health crisis that the nation is facing. Since health experts have warned that the Covid-19 outbreak is gradually approaching its peak in the country and that the situation is likely to worsen further, we have no option but to stay at home and strictly maintain the social distancing measures at all costs.

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It all began when Patient Zero was identified with Covid-19 on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan City, China. Since then, life around the world has changed. All the little things that used to be taken for granted—from stepping outside for a cup of tea to touching one's face—are now a threat to oneself. Compared to the overwhelming numbers of many countries, there are 3,772 confirmed coronavirus cases in Bangladesh as of April 22. But the potential for a surge in cases remains unless we adopt necessary measures and prepare for a possible catastrophic future.

Covid-19 is not only a public health or medical issue; it requires a multidisciplinary planning and approach. The outbreak of the virus challenges not only the virological and epidemiological fields but also requires the critical intervention of spatial planning. Urban systems and deadly diseases have historically maintained a correlation that functions in parallel during and after the outbreak. The 19th-century cholera pandemics in Europe resulted in the development of water and sewage systems. In 1854, British physician John Snow used geographic mapping to locate a cholera outbreak in London that led to the saving of many lives. Even though scientists at that time did not fully understand what caused the Yellow Fever outbreak in 1793, Philadelphia began building one of America's first water treatment plants after the fever subsided.

Many of the successful measures taken by some countries to reduce the spread of Covid-19, as well as bring down the number of deaths, are based on a collaborative and multi-agency action.

Covid-19 may gradually create a substantial change in the urban system once it de-escalates. But while it is still in progress, it is also extremely crucial to have a better assessment of successful strategies in various countries so that we can identify and analyse possible measures that may work in our own context.

Most virus-affected Western countries have imposed a temporary lockdown, or a slowdown, on their people to ensure fewer gatherings so that the spread of the virus is slowed, and the surge on hospitals is levelled. Until recently, Europe was

the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently, on a global scale, the United States has the highest infection rate and the highest number of deaths. While these countries have imposed lockdowns and closed borders, they still have a difficult time keeping the numbers down.

On the other hand, New Zealand seems to have managed to contain the outbreak before it ever had a chance to begin. Some East Asian countries are also managing it in an effective way. Vietnam, for instance, has had fewer cases with no death count so far. With the motto of "proactiveness and consistency throughout the response," Vietnam is

Korea, Singapore, China, and Taiwan took lessons from that epidemic, and started taking precautions for future epidemics long before they tracked down the first coronavirus patient in the region.

Since the antidotes or vaccines for the coronavirus are still in the pipeline, the East Asian countries cited here used both pragmatic and high-tech systems. Taiwan used prevention policies to reduce the infection rate. China teaches us the importance of preparedness to prevent and control infectious disease outbreak with technology and pragmatic systems. On the other hand, the South Korean experience emphasises the need

mentioned, and the measures that we can take. First, let us take a look at the comparative picture:

Taiwan: Taiwan implemented a 124-point action plan to keep the death rate to less than 2 percent of the confirmed cases. The country was also very strict about border control and screening. Government policies to isolate people and mandate on the mask export, as well as fixing selling price and local production proved effective for public health.

Hangzhou, China: Hangzhou is the capital city of Zhejiang Province in China, about 1,000 miles away from Wuhan—the ground zero for the coronavirus pandemic. Authorities in Hangzhou were cautious the very moment the virus spread in Wuhan, going into a lockdown to prevent the infection. China's use of technology helped management facilities to isolate, monitor and treat positive cases with accuracy. With constant tracking, there was breach of privacy but identification of infected cases was prompt and efficient. This also reduced the contamination in clusters.

South Korea: Having conducted over 15,000 tests daily, South Korea also maintains an expansive and well-organised testing system. This allows the country to completely isolate the patients from the virus-free people. Through the use of apps, the authorities keep track on a patient's whereabouts, and also lets people know who may have come in contact with the patient in recent times based on their recent locations. The idea is to identify and isolate every single person who may come closer to the affected person.

Singapore: The early preparation taken by the authorities has been in favour of Singapore. It relied on tracking the affected people using the vast network of social media, apps, and text messages. Over 9,000 temporary health clinics have been established to keep the patients isolated. The goal is to keep the affected people completely separated in temporary clinics, away from the virus-free community, and to make sure no transmission takes place by them.

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one of the first countries to have sealed down neighbourhoods when workers started coming back from China after the Chinese New Year. They also put great emphasis on building awareness in their own cultural way of dancing, singing, and making short animations.

Of all countries, South Korea, Singapore, China, and Taiwan have taken effective strategic measures at the right time, and have been largely successful in slowing down the spread of the virus compared to many developed countries. It is known that the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has a genetic relation with SARS-CoV that caused an outbreak during 2002-2004, mostly in Eastern Asia. South

for isolating the patients and building awareness among the people using the social media platform. The main focus of Singapore was to track the virus-affected people, and isolate the virus-free people from the affected ones by keeping the latter in hospital until they recover.

Researchers at Bengal Institute looked at Taiwan, the Chinese province of Zhejiang, South Korea and Singapore to understand the strategies each country developed and implemented to fight against Covid-19. We in Bangladesh can learn from these strategies in order to devise our own successful measures. In two parts, we present a comparison of the successful strategies of the four countries

The double whammy of Covid-19 and climate change

We need global solidarity to tackle the emergencies



ONE of the biggest lessons coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic is that we are living in an interlinked world where no country can cut itself off for very long and no country can tackle the problem by itself. This lesson is even more true as we battle the double whammy of Covid-19 and the climate change.

Therefore, one of the solutions that we need immediately is the operationalising of global solidarity. This needs to happen at multiple levels including governments working through the United Nations, multinational companies working globally, financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank as well as many others.

Currently, the most vulnerable communities in cities around the world, mainly in developing countries, are suffering the most from the lockdown measures and economic downturn that many countries are facing. While individuals and households in the slums of Dhaka, Mumbai, Nairobi, Lagos, Buenos Aires and Manila might feel that they are alone and cannot do anything themselves, they are, in fact, linked to the wider citizenry both in their own countries and across the globe.

Over the last couple of years, I have been involved in an effort to link up the communities that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change under the aegis of the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA). The GCA has come out with seven Action Tracks on Adaptation globally and is currently in its Year of Action for each of the tracks. I have been closely involved with one of these tracks, namely the Locally Led Adaptation Action Track, which is led by two of its commissioners, namely Dr Musa representing both BRAC Bangladesh and BRAC International and Sheela Patel of the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) which links together locally led groups in the major slums of the developing world. Together with other groups working

with the most vulnerable communities such as indigenous people, women, children, waste-pickers and others, we have been linking these grassroots groups with universities and research institutions both locally and globally to share the practical experience and experiential learning emerging out of these disparate but connected groups around the world.

In the last few weeks as the Covid-19 pandemic has been spreading from country to country, the communities with which we have been working have found themselves to be at the forefront of lockdowns being imposed in many countries. Hence, we are immediately moving our work into tackling the Covid-19 while, at the same time,

implemented to deal with the Covid-19 public health problem as well as the economic fallout of the lockdowns, it is absolutely necessary to involve the communities themselves in implementing the policies. The one-size-fits-all approach behind total lockdowns is almost impossible to bear fruit in the most densely populated slums in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The groups we are working with are already engaging with their local and national authorities to ensure that the people are enabled to take action through providing proper information and advice, rather than mere enforcement of regulations by the police.

The other dimension that we will be

and protecting the natural environment.

Finally, there is the opportunity that we need to explore, using the potential created by the ongoing shutdowns, to connect with each other over social media and online meeting platforms. We will be undertaking webinars, Zoom meetings and blogs and video logs to share our thoughts and experience with each other and with the rest of the world.

We are trying to follow the great example of the schoolchildren in the Fridays for Future movement, under the leadership of Greta Thunberg, who have been coming out of school in hundreds of cities around the world, including in Bangladesh, every Friday for over a year. They have also adapted their Friday school strikes to take them online after the schools were shut due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are aiming to link students from many universities in Bangladesh with their counterparts from LUCCC as well as others in the South Asian region and finally other parts of the world. The idea is to engage the university students, who don't have classes now, with the vulnerable communities in their respective towns and join forces to tackle both Covid-19 and climate change going forward.

Personally, the most important lesson that I can discern from the best practices we are seeing around the world in dealing with Covid-19 is that states like Kerala in India and countries like Vietnam as well as Korea and Germany have relied more on informing their respective populations about what they had to do and why, rather than suddenly announcing decisions and using law enforcement authorities to impose those. Hence, when it comes to the most vulnerable developing countries including Bangladesh, we must rely on informing and educating our populations, particularly the most vulnerable communities, and listen to their concerns when formulating and implementing new policies or regulations. Without an informed and engaged population, we cannot overcome either the Covid-19 pandemic or the climate change emergency.

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preparing for tackling the climate change impacts that will inevitably affect them.

One way in which we plan to do so is for the researchers from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC) to talk to the representatives of communities in the most vulnerable cities and towns and then tell their stories through social media—and at the same time, to engage with decision-makers at the city and national levels and even the global level. Our contention is that for a better impact of the policies being

exploring in the near term is to ensure that the different national economic stimulus packages that are being planned and implemented in every country prioritise investments that are both people- and environment-friendly. It is essential to ensure that we do not return to business as usual, which had caused the public health and climate change emergencies in the first place, but rather move towards a "new normal" where the policies are aimed at helping the most vulnerable citizens of every country as well as reducing emissions of greenhouse gases

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop corruption in relief distribution

Due to the nationwide lockdown, numerous individuals have lost their jobs and other sources of income. And with no means to earn money, many of them are suffering from hunger, particularly those from the low-income and marginalised groups in society. So dire is their situation that many are being forced to take the risk to come out of home with the hopes of collecting alms whenever and wherever possible.

Though the government has allocated food and financial aid for the poor and needy, it seems that the relief is not reaching those who need it the most. Recent reports have shed light on the misappropriation and irregularities in the distribution process. In one case, UP chairmen and members were suspended for embezzlement of relief rice, assault on relief seekers and negligence of duty. It's a shame that despite the prime minister's warning that corruption in relief distribution would not be tolerated, such incidents keep happening. When will we ever learn? We are dealing with a crisis here, yet some people can't overcome their greed.

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