

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Tuomo Poutiainen, country director at the International Labour Organisation, speaks about May Day, measures aimed at tackling the coronavirus pandemic and the importance of protecting workers, by Refayet Ullah Mirdha and Md Fazlur Rahman

'Sustainability of businesses depends on how we protect our workers from COVID-19'

How do you look at this May Day in the context of the pandemic?

This May Day came during difficult global and local health and socioeconomic crises. The pandemic has disproportionately affected some sectors of the population who are already vulnerable and lack little or no social protection coverage. These groups include women, youth, older workers, indigenous people, migrants, those with disabilities and self-employed persons.

The crisis has highlighted that some professionals who are usually undervalued or even ignored are the working heroes of this pandemic -- care workers, cleaners, grocery sellers, supermarket cashiers, delivery and transport staff -- are often among the ranks of the working poor.

Our current and future policy choices should address these inequalities exposed by the pandemic. On this May Day, let us reflect on our past shortcomings in the world of work and adjust priorities to ensure decent work and future for all working women and men.

The priorities should be adequate social protection to protect the vulnerable; improved working conditions to safeguard workers in their workplaces; and a strong social dialogue between government, employers and workers to find sustainable and equitable solutions to labour market issues.

What are the ILO's recommendations for protecting workers once factories start reopening?

ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said, "In the face of an infectious disease outbreak, how we protect our workers now clearly dictates how safe our communities are, and how resilient our businesses will be, as this pandemic evolves."

which not only puts them at risk but also others they come in contact with.

Preventive and protective measures are the most effective ways to keep it at bay. Hence, ensuring decent working conditions and rights for workers is as important as ever, and to the benefit of society and the

approach to slowing down the virus.

The government is providing food and financial support. As the crisis evolves, this type of support needs to be continued. The current crisis highlights the need for social protection measures that can help countries weather economic shocks.

What are your suggestions so that the workers don't lose jobs because of coronavirus?

The ILO is calling for urgent and significant policy responses to protect enterprises and workers operating in both the formal and informal economies.

We are recommending employment retention through work-sharing and reskilling, and extending social protection to ensure income security, access to subsistence allowance and basic healthcare for all workers.

The Bangladesh government has commendably announced several stimulus packages to support industries and enterprises to continue their businesses. What is important is also reaching the workers and enterprises who need it the most.

Change in workplace safety since Rana Plaza building collapse?

Bangladesh has come a long way since the 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy. Thousands of factories have been inspected on electrical, fire and structural safety.

A wide range of safety remediation and improvement measures have been taken and many tens of thousands of employers and workers educated and trained on occupational safety and health.

Yet not all factories are up to the agreed standards and more still needs to be done to mitigate safety and health risks at workplaces.

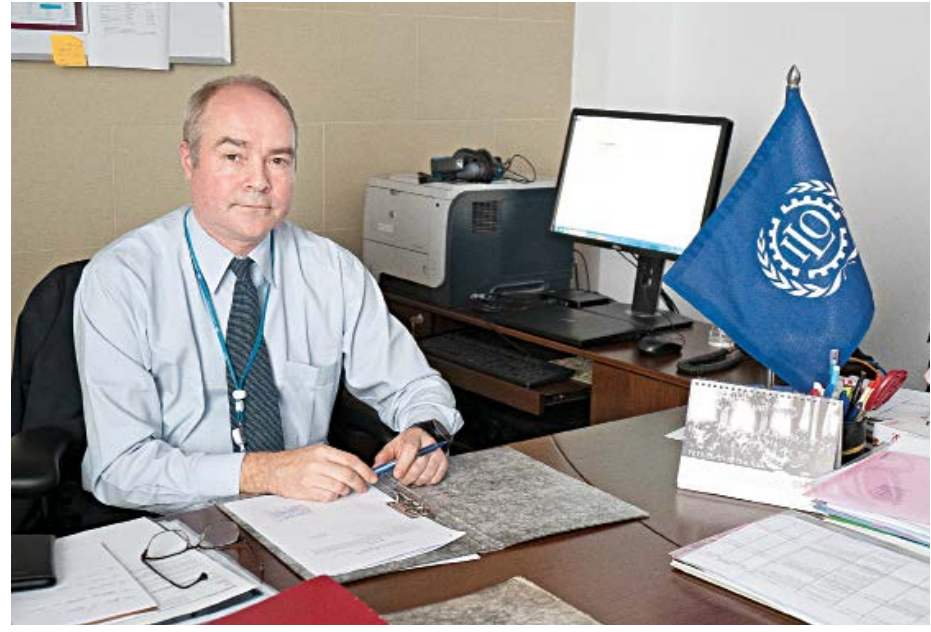
What are your recommendations for skills development for the workers?

The ILO has projected that nearly half of the global workforce -- around 1.6 billion people -- are at risk of losing their livelihoods. The need to reskill and/or upskill these laid-off workers will be critical.

Moreover, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers are also coming home and many may not have jobs to go back to.

The ILO is working with the Ministry of Expatriates to provide essential entrepreneurship and skills development training to returnee migrants to help them to better reintegrate into the domestic labour market.

We will also be exploring means to formalise their existing skills and experiences via recognition of prior learning certification process. This will help boost their future job prospects in Bangladesh and overseas.



Strong safety and health measures for workers are the first requirements when considering a return to workplaces. Protective workplace-specific measures must be adopted based on common dialogue between employers and workers, and a shared understanding of coronavirus risks.

Do you think the factories are following the health and safety rules properly?

The sustainability of businesses depends on how we protect our workers from COVID-19. To safeguard workers and prevent the transmission of the virus in workplaces, the ILO has developed COVID-19 specific Occupational Safety and Health guidelines, together with the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments of Bangladesh.

Once endorsed and officially out there, businesses must ensure that they are applied and that management and workers understand them and are equipped to follow them.

In the first week of April, hundreds of thousands of workers desperately tried to return to Dhaka and other industrial belts defying lockdown to keep jobs?

In the absence of protection such as sick leave or unemployment benefits, millions of workers may need to make a cruel choice between their health and their livelihoods,

economy at large.

What challenges do you see for the factory owners and workers as they resume production?

As garment factories start to reopen in Bangladesh, every factory will have to face its own unique set of challenges. However, collectively, the most pressing challenge will be to ensure proper health and safety conditions in factories to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Although there is no doubt about the commitment of most factory owners to keep the workers safe, there is a real risk of coronavirus infection in factories as the number of COVID-19 cases is still on the rise in Bangladesh, particularly in densely populated industrial belts, where most of the factories are located.

The Better Work Bangladesh has already released a COVID-19 Management Guidance to help the industry ensure that workplaces are safe and healthy while being able to maintain operations.

Has Bangladesh done enough to protect workers during lockdown?

The government of Bangladesh was quick to respond to the threat of COVID-19 and had very little choice but to announce a general holiday. This was the same measure taken by every other country and is a proven

'The risks are grave. We don't want to go back to work right away.'

NAZMA AKHTER

On the previous occasions of May Day, we were demanding our rights, safety for our workers, freedom of association, gender equality, living wages and many other issues.

But this May Day we have a bigger fight than we ever imagined: we are also fighting COVID-19, which has led to hundreds of thousands of workers losing their jobs, losing their pay and fighting with police and factory owners.

Now we are demanding job security and social protection, the payment of wages and proper social distancing. Many have still not been paid for March. The situation is so serious -- hundreds of thousands of people are now facing immediate risks to their lives and livelihoods.

Under the present circumstances, I think it is much too soon to open factories, but the pressure on us is immense and the government has instructed us to reopen.

Brands are also pushing as some stores in America and Europe are starting to reopen and they want us to go back to work as well.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association has asked for our support to open the factories.

We said we would like all the ministries to sit together with the labour representatives and talk about how to open the factories. But they did not do this. They decided just to open the factories.

Now, the government, unions, related ministries and brands should all monitor the situation in all the factories. We must ensure this is being done correctly.

There is nothing more important in this world than the lives and safety of the people making these clothes. Many other countries are putting the health of their citizens first. Bangladesh must do this also.

The consequences of putting competitiveness and profit before workers' health are too grave. If their health and safety are not protected, there will be no industry left to speak of.

Some brands have behaved well and respected orders, but many others -- in fact, the majority -- have not. And these are not small companies. They are not respecting the rights of workers -- our rights are not properly protected in the supply chain.

There is no respect, there is no dignity and there is no legal protection.

If workers are affected and die of coronavirus infections, suppliers and brands should be held responsible.

We all know there has never been enough responsibility or liability for workers' sufferings and deaths.

Workers have died for these companies who promised accidents like the Rana Plaza collapse will never happen again and still, they are asking us to reopen factories and risk our lives.

Workers are saying the risks are grave and they do not want to go back to work at this moment like they had said just before the Rana Plaza disaster when the building's owners ignored warnings to avoid using the building after cracks had appeared the day before.

The writer is the president of Sammito Garment Sramik Federation, a platform of garment workers

In the face of an infectious disease outbreak, how we protect our workers now clearly dictates how safe our communities are, and how resilient our businesses will be, as this pandemic evolves.

Opening factories would do more harm than good

KHONDAKER GOLAM MOAZZEM

The recent events in the garment sector regarding the workers' unpaid wages, layoffs, retrenchment and opening of factories without proper safety measures portray that the May Day does not bear any more significance than a normal day.

I think there is no strong reason for opening garment factories at a time of high incidence of coronavirus infection in the country. In case of emergency, factories should negotiate with their buyers about revised schedules for shipment of orders.

Since most of the shops and businesses are closed in major apparel importing countries, factory owners could easily pursue a rescheduled timeline.

Opening the factories with a high risk of infection in the workplace would make the factories more vulnerable and thus reduce the scope for getting orders in future.

Such a hurried move for short-term benefits may push the factories as well as the sector in long-term risks of occupational safety and health.

We have noticed that the decision on opening the factories is not giving priority to the directives of the health ministry.

Since social distancing is being promoted everywhere, how could factories be opened when maintaining social distancing is almost impossible in case of movement to and from the factories?

Since the country is going through a period of health emergency, the directives of the health ministry should have taken precedence over other ministries.

In a few cases, we have noticed the participation of trade union representatives in the discussion, but the role and influence of workers in such a decision-making process were found to be minimal.

Garment manufacturers often

say that if they do not reopen their factories now, they would lose competitiveness in the international market, but we do not think so.

The whole world is closed: a few countries have opened their factories (such as Vietnam) because they were able to contain the spread of the virus successfully.

This logic does not apply to Bangladesh as it seems we have a long way to go in this battle.

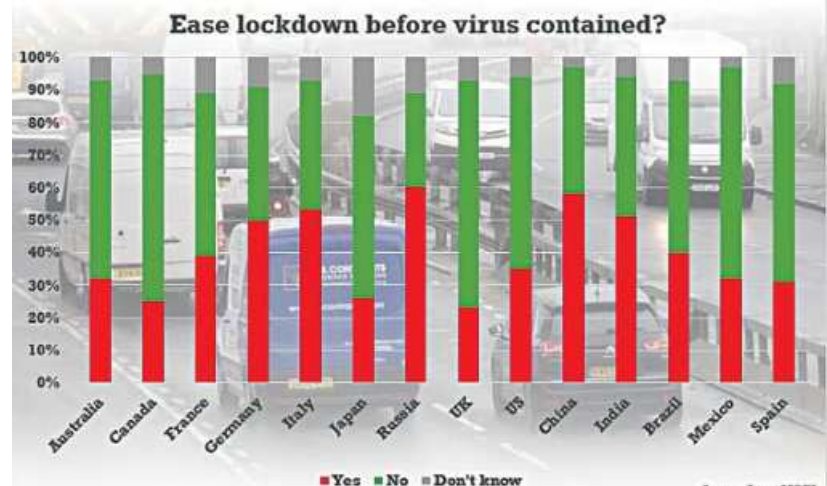
Given the limited awareness and understanding about personal safety

their economic concerns.

We know that the government is working closely with the International Labour Organisation in preparing emergency safety guidelines.

However, some follow-up steps are associated with the formation of committees at the factory level, awareness-raising and identification of vulnerable areas in the factories.

All the stakeholders, particularly the government and workers, trade unions, local and international organisations, should work closely



as well as the limited institutional capacity for the factories to ensure health safety at the workplace, the decision to open factories needs to be taken cautiously.

If we hurry to go back to production and thereby coronavirus spreads across the worker community and other regions, the benefit of the month-long holidays will go in vain.

The health-related concerns should get priority over other economic emergencies.

We think that the government measures for the industries, particularly for the export-oriented sectors, should adequately address

on social dialogue to ensure workers' rights at this crucial moment.

We have a plan to monitor the safety situation if we could collaborate with international organisations.

We think that the challenges in the world of work -- particularly business, employment, working conditions, workers' rights and the role of brands and buyers -- will persist for more than a year, which would have different impact and implications for the overall working conditions in the country.

The writer is the research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue

NEXT STEP

Making a DIFFERENCE

Bangladesh is rapidly moving towards middle income status by 2021. Our businesses definitely offer immense opportunities for the growing economy and this diversity needs a stage for the stories untold. See Bangladesh make its mark on the global map as Making a Difference brings you our proudest success stories from across the country.

The Psychological Price of Entrepreneurship

How many times have you heard entrepreneurs say "Fake it till you make it"? This is what the social psychiatrists call impression management, which has been practised by business leaders for years. We idolise successful entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk but forget the fact that many of them had to struggle through despair times before they made it big.

LEARNING STAGE

As much as this phase may be considered the most enjoyable parts of entrepreneurship, the business leaders may be driven by a range of emotions. From curiosity about the new aspects of the business to anger towards the education system for not preparing them for real-life experiences, to fear of not being successful. Their vision of a business turns out to be far from what they originally thought going into college.

TRIAL AND ERROR STAGE

Entrepreneurs and people in business have gone through this stage. More than ever, it is an intelligent strategy, trial and error, extreme and uncanny passion, and a die-hard work ethic that gets them through it. They go through feelings of uncertainty, panic and the urge to prove themselves. Leadership requires perseverance when their initial plan fails, and they have to start from scratch again.

GOING FULL-TIME STAGE

Once the business is up and running, leaders start to bite more than they can chew. Entrepreneurs often juggle between roles and face countless setbacks such as lost customers, disputes with partners, increased competition, staffing problems, all while struggling to make payroll.



People who are on the energetic and creative side are both more likely to be entrepreneurial and more likely to have strong emotional states. Those states may include depression, despair, worthlessness, loss of motivation, and suicidal thinking.

KNOWING WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE STAGE

Entrepreneurs often make the mistake of neglecting their health during this stage. They either eat too much or too little. They deprive themselves of proper sleep or exercise. Most leaders get into a startup mode where they push themselves and abuse their body, triggering mood vulnerability. This is the point where they realize that they have too much on their plate and need to cool down.

OROBI BAKHTIAR