

# What does Nurjahan need?

Can we think of a human centred approach to tackle the Covid-19 crisis?



TASMIAH T RAHMAN

I was talking to my household care worker, i.e. domestic worker, Nurjahan (not her real name). A person who can do it all—not only does she cook and clean, she

does groceries when needed, waters my plants, feeds my cat and gives me immense mental support when I'm down. She has been on leave since the lockdown started in Bangladesh. Nurjahan and her husband live in a tiny one bedroom home in a slum to save as much as possible for their daughters, who live in their home village with her mother. While she works in three houses, her husband is a rickshaw puller. Her family is one example of where the "lockdown" has hit the hardest. My conversations with her regarding this crisis made me realise that we are hardly taking their voices into consideration. While I understand that a more centralised approach is being taken now for the poor and vulnerable, perhaps a human centred approach will help individuals more by providing community level solutions.

When I asked if they are practicing social distancing (first of all, this is a concept that was difficult for her to understand!), she said it is simply not possible because there is just no space. She added, "Frankly many of us also don't want to do this, because it is up to God to give a disease. We have had *thankuni pata*, so it will not touch us." Many people in her slum have taken this leaf which supposedly strengthens the immune system. This is the basic understanding of many poor people in the country.

The idea of social distancing is not just alien in Dhaka slums—it is impossible for social and economic

reasons too. People come back to their rooms only to sleep. Nonetheless, Nurjahan told me how the showers and kitchens are now maintained so that people can go one by one to wash and cook food, thanks to local volunteers from an NGO who raised awareness and asked them to use these common areas according to a schedule.

Nurjahan also mentioned that since the lockdown was announced, many people went back to their villages, so the slums are not so crowded now. Her sister-in-law went home when the government announced the "holiday", but the factory where she works asked her to return to work despite the lockdown. She had to walk for hours and found it extremely difficult to reach Dhaka without public transport. In the end, she gave up and stayed home. The recent announcement to open up garment factories has been a confusing change of events for these workers, and Nurjahan is worried about how her sister-in-law will join work without any available transport for her to return in. However, she has received her salary arrears via Bkash.

Thankfully, Nurjahan has food and cash at hand at the moment, but she is not being allowed to go out to buy groceries. Her husband has almost no earnings as a self-employed rickshaw puller and her brother's small car mechanic shop in the village is also closed. His employees have left and he has paid them whatever he could. Currently, he is still paying rent and utility bills for that shop. Once this crisis is over, he has to start over. He needs immediate cash support and a long term financial plan to stay in business. Many are in need. But the "fear of catching a cold and dying from it" does not pose a larger threat than going hungry with their family, she said.

The government of Bangladesh has ramped up emergency responses. As of May 1, the urban poor are to get Tk

2000 (approximately USD 23.71) per household for 50 lakh families. When I asked if her extended family received any support, she mentioned that her brother, who is a person with disability, received cash support of Tk 1500 (approximately USD 17) from BRAC in her village, which she is very happy about. She also received food support from Sajeda Foundation last week that will last her almost a month. However, she still thinks that her husband and brother need to earn a living for

because employers are more cautious and more afraid than we are. We are often confused about what is being announced by the government and how we should move, behave, get food etc. Often we verify these news from local leaders or NGO representatives in slums. It will be good if local leaders talk to us from time to time. Messages come on the phone about how to prevent this virus. Maybe the directions can also come as voice messages so that we know what to do.

us go. They should treat us with more dignity because people do not know how to act. Hitting us and scolding us will not help us in getting the right information.

Without work, we will not be able to survive long. Going out to work is better for us, instead of staying in the cramped slum quarters. If I stay at home all day with my husband, we fight more! He shouts more since he sits all day, frustrated without any money. Women are often getting beaten up in houses and we hear them scream. There should be some sort of community awareness and a "community watch" that can go door to door and discuss issues of domestic violence. Also, if I get sick, I will need medical care. It will be good to know more about how I can get that treatment, closer to where I live. Right now, there is a new medical centre where people can go if they have symptoms that match this illness, but many people are not admitting that they have fever, out of fear. There needs to be more information available on what to do, if someone gets sick. "Miking" (public announcements via microphones) will help because people listen to those.

My brother was doing so well with his business and was helping the whole family. Can he also not get cash support for paying his employees and rent? And then when the situation is better, he needs more support so that he can continue his business. Can my elder daughter start her classes also? She is just sitting at home. Her school is closed and there is no online and phone based teaching in local villages. Maybe they can have classes where they can sit in the open field and study, so children can social distance but also go to school.

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This aerial view of the Korail slum shows how difficult it would be to practice social distancing in such a congested area.

STAR FILE PHOTO

the family as a whole. More than 80 percent of the country's people work in the informal sector and they are being hit the hardest, as they simply cannot sit at home and live off their limited savings.

I asked Nurjahan what she thinks she needs as solutions to these problems, and the following are a few things she suggested, in her words.

Social distancing is not being maintained. It is best to let us go to work, where we can maintain social distance and follow safety procedures—

The way food is being distributed is not equal for all. Only strong people can go in front and collect, while physically weak people stay at the back. I can go and stand in the line all day but my brother, who is a person with a disability, cannot go. So it will be better if he can be reached at home with daily essentials. We are also not allowed to go to *bazaars* to buy essentials. The police are scolding us on the streets and criminalising us, but what if someone has emergency needs? There should be a way to let

# Opening up the economy with smart, scientific and sectoral solutions

ASIF M ZAMAN

IN the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a big debate now on the trade-offs between lives and livelihoods in Bangladesh and many other developing countries. Unlike many developed nations, livelihood does not just mean addressing the basic needs—rather it is a matter of survival. In other words, ignoring livelihoods in Bangladesh may lead to severe recession or even famine. In grim terms, the reality is loss of life, either by hunger or by pandemic. A recent Yale study shows that the benefits of lockdown is lower for the developing countries than the developed ones.

So the lockdown, which is adversely affecting livelihoods, may not be a long term model for Bangladesh. In fact, in some cases it may be counterproductive. For example, in slums or low income settlements, workers live in a very congested environment and social distancing is next to impossible to maintain at home. Thus, these people are aimlessly roaming around without any purpose, beating the sole purpose of the lockdown. The rate of contacts per person may be lower if the workers can be moved back to their workplaces, where proper protocols of social distancing and personal hygiene can be maintained more effectively. These protocols should cover both workplaces and the homes of the workers, as well as transport. The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently warned that opening up the economy without preparations will lead to a second wave

of pandemic.

Therefore, as the lockdown continues, we should think of smart, science based and sectoral (3S) approaches of how to open up the economy.

By "smart solutions", we mean effective but cheap, innovative but easy-to-use solutions to minimise the risk of Covid-19 in the workplace. Hence, it requires the cross-fertilisation

of ideas from different disciplines: public health experts, clinicians, industrial-organisational psychologists, economists, architects and engineers. Lessons from the best practices across the world, from the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) to Kerala's umbrella solution need to be compiled, customised and tested. We have learnt that architects and urban

planners are already experimenting with innovative solutions in the slums of Dhaka. The solutions for workplace safety must have solid scientific foundations—the risk assessment of a workplace and strategies for mitigation must be scientific (i.e. science-based solutions). The innovations have to be data based, implying that data will drive the solutions and its effectiveness



PHOTO: COLLECTED

can also be measured in a scientific way, for example, by using randomised control trials. Understanding the (social) science of technology adoption and the willingness to pay are critical in diffusing such technology. Based on the risk assessment findings, customised protocols for the various sectors—manufacturing, service and construction—need to

be developed so that these sectors can start operating by minimising the risk of contagion. These will be part of the sectoral solutions. For example, industrial engineers can redesign the workplaces of RMG industries to ensure adequate physical distancing with little changes. The shifts of workers can be increased to minimise the number of workers at one point of time. The operations should ensure physical distancing, avoid contact between workers and maintain hygiene. The workers' flow or movements need to be properly designed and monitored. There should be protocols during entry to the factory and during their stay. Guidelines should be in place if anybody develops symptoms; psychological counselling is required to elevate worker morale. Special equipment like automatic/foot operated hand washing stands or disinfection chambers using food grade disinfectants can be installed at the gate of each floor.

Whereas worker flow solutions are needed for industries with factories, the service sector requires customer/client flow solutions. Worker flow solutions focus on keeping product delivery efficient and ensuring worker safety. Customer/client flow solutions ensure customer/client satisfaction and the safety of both customer/client and the service provider. The construction industry, on the other hand, needs to come up with site management protocols. These may include site entry/egress procedures, limiting number of workers on site (crew shifts), maintaining worker hygiene, cleaning

tools before sharing, delineating different risk zones within the site, etc. The construction project schedules need to be designed so that workers can work in parallel, avoiding labour intensive functions.

All of the sectors need to have customised protocols if employees become infected with Covid-19. This protocol should include procedures for detecting symptoms, isolating the infected ones and arranging hospitalisation if needed.

The huge stimulus package of the government can be tied to the compliance of the guidelines for workplace safety. Adoption of new risk minimising technologies can also be subsidised through the stimulus package. It is not only financing; building awareness among the entrepreneurs is also critical in successful implementation of such guidelines.

The preparation of sector-wise customised protocols for resuming work is a mammoth task. These protocols have to be approved by the appropriate regulatory bodies of the government. The private sector can play a key role in helping government develop these guidelines, for they have the sectoral expertise. We know that some private sector firms have already started to market a wide range of solutions to jumpstart the economy. These efforts should be encouraged and incentivised by the government in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### FIRST FLIGHT OVER THE NORTH POLE

May 12, 1926  
Aboard the semirigid airship *Norge*, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, American scientist Lincoln Ellsworth, and Italian engineer Umberto Nobile made the first undisputed flight over the North Pole on this day in 1926.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

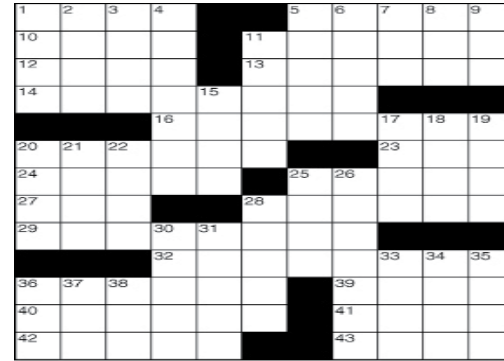
### ACROSS

- 1 Loudly lament
- 5 Scottish lord
- 10 Mystique
- 11 Makes blank
- 12 Sports figure
- 13 Feels the absence of
- 14 Trap to catch computer hackers
- 16 Less than wonderful
- 20 Meager
- 23 Stunned wonder
- 24 Practical
- 25 "Tomorrow" singer
- 27 Sturdy wood
- 28 Sights
- 29 "Uh-uh"
- 32 Spot on a shirt
- 36 Polite word

### DOWN

- 1 Scrub
- 2 Sedan or compact
- 3 Persia, today
- 4 Prints, in cop jargon
- 5 Small singing groups
- 6 Must
- 7 Braying beast
- 8 Originally called
- 9 Snaky shape
- 11 Vacant
- 15 Days gone by
- 17 Put up

- 18 Tot's scrape
- 19 Casual tops
- 20 Sound of disappearing
- 21 Miles off
- 22 1987 Suzanne Vega hit
- 25 In a frenzy
- 26 Boris's partner
- 28 Bay
- 30 Bridge utterance
- 31 Rx amounts
- 33 Cabinet part
- 34 Ibsen's home
- 35 Chuck of "Meet the press"
- 36 Score amts.
- 37 Spike of film
- 38 Water, in the Seine



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



## BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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