

We need a national action plan to contain the Covid-19 fallout

BARKAT-E-KHUIDA

LIKE most countries, Bangladesh is going through an unprecedented crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of both health and economic outcomes, with increasing number of infected cases and deaths from Covid-19, and severe economic losses in terms of production, exports and remittances, resulting in considerable unemployment, loss of income and rising poverty. Bangladesh's GDP growth, averaging around 8 percent during the past few years, is projected to grow at between 2 percent and 3 percent in 2020, according to the World Bank. With around 20 percent of the population under the poverty line and another 10 percent living in extreme poverty, Bangladesh is quite vulnerable to economic shocks resulting from the global pandemic. According to an IMF estimate, over 2 million people could be added to the ranks of poor people in Bangladesh in 2020. At present, the reported number of unemployed people ranges from 10 million to 15 million compared to 2.7 million in 2017.

The government has been taking various measures to contain the fallout from the pandemic, including the stimulus packages (Tk 1 trillion, equivalent to 3.6 percent of GDP) and its ongoing safety net and relief programmes. However, since the pandemic will not fade out in the near foreseeable future, there is a need for a National Action Plan for three years, as has also been indicated by the prime minister recently. To me, the Plan should have two broad goals: (1) ensure healthy lives, and (2) ensure livelihood by bringing the economy back to its pre-crisis level in a phased-in manner. The Plan should involve all relevant government agencies and other concerned stakeholders; focus on six critical areas relating to health and economic well-being (as discussed below); and have time-bound measurable targets, clearly defined roles and responsibilities of different implementing agencies, as well as a monitoring framework to track the performance of the Plan.

The immediate priority is to contain the fallout from the pandemic by enhancing the capacity and resources of the health sector to reduce the spread of the virus. Economic policies will be needed to protect against the impact of the decline in economic activity, and ensure that soon after the pandemic starts receding, the process of economic recovery can begin in a phased-in manner with due regard given to health safety standards. Economic policies should include targeted monetary, fiscal and financial market measures to support affected households and business establishments.

First, the crisis caused by the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of health system in most countries, including Bangladesh. Bangladesh's health programme suffers from several major weaknesses. Under the present context, it needs to be considerably strengthened by ensuring: (1) adequate number of testing facilities; (2) adequate number of treatment centres, equipped with properly functioning ICU units including ventilators; and (3) frontline workers properly equipped with PPEs, gloves and masks. This calls for greater public sector investment. The health ministry should use this opportunity to lobby for considerably larger funding, preferably to the tune of 4 percent of GDP, as recommended by the WHO. It should also take needed reform measures and ensure greater involvement of development partners, NGOs and the private sector.

Second, given the importance of the agriculture sector in ensuring food security and providing employment to around 40 percent of the labour force, the National Action Plan should ensure that: (1) farmers receive loans; (2) supply of agricultural inputs at the field level is maintained; and (3) farmers receive fair price for their products. Otherwise, it could have serious demotivating effects on the farmers. In addition to what has been allocated under the stimulus package, the concerned ministries, especially the agriculture and food ministries, should identify implementable strategies in the Plan to

ensure the safety and security of this sector.

Third, there is rising unemployment and loss of income, especially among workers in the low-wage informal sector, the self-employed, the youth, and several lakh returnee migrant workers. Therefore, the National Action Plan should: (1) ensure food security for them by distributing essential food items at the local level (allocation for safety net programmes needs to be raised to around 6 percent of GDP);

and its share of the GDP, this sector deserves urgent attention. In addition to what has been allocated under the stimulus package, the industries ministry should come out with implementable strategies to take the sector to its pre-pandemic level and beyond by the end of the Plan period.

Fifth, the RMG sector, the major source of foreign exchange earnings and providing employment to around 4 million people, especially females, is

the crisis faced by the sector, the government, together with BGMEA and BKMEA and in collaboration with our foreign buyers, should identify implementable strategies in the Plan to ensure that exports can reach its pre-pandemic level and beyond by the end of the Plan period. Further, over-reliance on garments exports should be gradually reduced, and efforts should be intensified to diversify our export basket and explore new markets for our products.

Sixth, a major concern relates to the large number of returnee migrant workers, and hence, substantial declines in remittances for at least during the foreseeable future. Since most of them are unskilled and semi-skilled, the Plan should identify their training needs (IT, electronics, vocational, technical, nursing, paramedic, etc.) and make provisions to impart training to them. Such training should be possible within the timeframe of the Plan. With training and enhanced skills, they should be able to get into higher paying jobs, which would enable them to send higher amounts of remittance than what they had sent during the pre-pandemic period to the benefit of both their households and the national economy. Further, those who received training but are not able or willing to get jobs overseas can be productively utilised in the domestic production process.

The National Action Plan would require substantial additional funding. The question is: where will such funding come from? It is obvious that internal resources mobilisation will be lower because of the considerable slowdown in economic activity and declines in export earnings and remittances. What, then, would be needed is to downsize and delay less relevant projects, revisit existing projects and cut costs wherever feasible, resort to deficit financing to the extent needed, and seek project funding from development partners and financing from international lending agencies.

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The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the underbelly of Bangladesh's health system which needs substantial reforms and funding.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

(2) make provisions for their job creation; (3) identify their training needs; and (4) make provisions for their training in the areas of IT, electronics, vocational, technical, nursing, paramedic, etc. This will require concerted efforts of a large number of ministries and the private sector.

Fourth, given the major contribution of the cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in terms of generating employment, especially female employment, to a sizeable proportion of the labour force

facing an unprecedented crisis on account of considerable decline in demand for RMG products globally and as a result of "lockdown" hampering domestic production. The overall export declined by 13 percent to USD 29.49 billion in the first ten months of FY 2019-20, compared to the corresponding period of the last FY. The RMG sector export earnings declined by 14 percent to USD 24.47 billion during the July-April period of FY 20, compared to the corresponding period during the preceding year. To address

RTI/FOI ACTS

Another Victim of the Covid-19 Pandemic

SHAMSUL BARI AND RUHI NAZ

ONE of the institutional casualties of the global Covid-19 pandemic is people's right to information. The Right to Information (RTI) Act, also known as Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in many countries, hosts the transparency regimes in around 130 out of some 210 countries affected by the pandemic. All of them fell victim to government lockdowns, imposed to fight the menace, making most of them inoperative almost instantly.

The physical closure of most public offices makes it difficult to implement this law. But while alternative arrangements were made for many essential services to continue, this was not the case for people's right to information. People were not told if they could still submit their RTI/FOI requests and whether they would receive responses. At a time when they needed most to know how their governments were dealing with such a cataclysmic crisis, they had no one to turn to. And at a time when governments needed to be most transparent and accountable to the people, the efficacy of the law was blunted.

As many governments adopted RTI laws more to enhance their democratic credentials than to promote transparent governance, it is not surprising that countries have rushed to take advantage of the disruption caused by the pandemic to muzzle these laws.

There is a message for RTI enthusiasts in this: whatever their commitment, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven the universal inclination of governments to hide unpleasant facts from the public. This is evident from their penchant to deter public scrutiny of their work and muzzle critics who question the veracity of their claims. Controlling or curtailing people's right to information is natural for governments. The RTI community must take this into account to determine future strategy to overcome it.

Public reaction to the secretive stance of governments has varied between countries. The more vociferous reactions came from countries where transparency regimes and/or a democratic culture are of a longer vintage. RTI/FOI groups in these countries came together to voice their concerns and suggest measures to safeguard the institution. They reminded governments about the importance of people's participation in efforts to tackle the grave crisis which is best ensured by giving them access to all critical information.

However, in countries where the RTI regime is yet to take root and the use of the law is limited even in normal times, there seems to be little public concern about the almost total stoppage of all RTI-related processes during the Covid-19 lockdown. In

Leading transparency and anti-corruption organisations from across Europe have produced a set of ten recommendations on how governments can ensure transparency of emergency procurement carried out during the coronavirus pandemic.

Bangladesh too, while social media and the press abound with comments and questions on government efforts to deal with the pandemic, no noises are heard about the fate of the fledgling RTI regime of the country. The Bangladesh Information Commission went into total lockdown since late March after announcing that there would be no more complaint hearings till further notice. People were not told if and how the RTI regime would operate during the lockdown. There was no government release either about any alternative mechanism for this purpose. It perhaps indicates the low estimation of the law in the eyes of the public, the Information Commission, and the government alike. As

the law aims at empowering citizens vis-à-vis the state, there is no point in blaming only the Information Commission or the government for this state of affairs, if citizens do not care about it.

The lockdown similarly affected the situation in the normally more vibrant RTI scene in neighbouring India. However, online applications have now resumed and the Central Information Commission began limited complaint hearings in late April, though State Information Commissions remained largely inactive.

A Canadian access-to-information specialist made the forecast that "overwhelmed FOI units will be months in recovery. And responses to substantial FOI requests related to the Covid-19 crisis are likely a year away."

Lamenting about this sorry state of affairs, Toby Mendel, a leader of the global transparency movement, commented: "We've got, on the one hand, this incredible need for accountability and, on the other hand, the institutions of accountability are operating well below their normal levels."

Harvard University Health-Law Professor I. Glenn Cohen told *The New York Times*: "Public health depends a lot on public trust. If the public feels as though they are being misled or misinformed their willingness to make sacrifices—in this case social distancing—is reduced." He hoped that "perhaps the lasting legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic will be a generational recommitment to restore custody

of critical health-and-safety information to its rightful public owners."

Leading transparency and anti-corruption organisations from across Europe have produced a set of ten recommendations on how governments can ensure transparency of emergency procurement carried out during the coronavirus pandemic.

The recommendations recognised that rapid purchase of equipment such as medical supplies was necessary but reminded governments that EU directives required them to keep a written justification for procurements and make them public. While emergency direct procurement was legal, it must be the exception, even during the pandemic, and should be judged on a case-by-case basis. These are good reminders for all governments.

A spokesperson of the European transparency group reminded governments that "the role of civil society watchdogs and investigative journalists is crucial in investigating wrongdoing, and they can be allies of government in fighting corruption, but they cannot do their job without information."

Apart from civil society groups, the International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC) reminded governments about their responsibilities during this critical time. They released a statement in mid-April entitled "Access to Information in the context of a global pandemic," in which they recalled that the impact of Covid-19 had brought unprecedented challenges for the society, both nationally and globally, and reminded governments about their responsibilities to deal with them diligently. They recognised that public authorities must make significant decisions affecting public health, civil liberties and people's prosperity, but reminded them simultaneously of the importance of maintaining people's right to access information in all circumstances. Equally importantly, they recognised their own

responsibility to take a pragmatic approach, for example around how quickly public bodies respond to information requests.


Signatories to the statement included representatives from most of the Information Commissions of the world, though South Asia was only represented by Punjab (Pakistan) and Nepal. Whatever may be the reason for the absences, there is no denying that we are all faced with a pandemic of enormous destructive force. It requires the combined efforts of all concerned, governments and the people alike, to fight the menace and to recover from the damage caused by it, both medically and economically. People's participation in the recovery process will be vital for real success. For that, it is essential that people are taken into confidence and given access to all pertinent public information that enhance their trust in the government. Where such trust existed, people were seen to respect government lockdowns more willingly than where that was not the case.

Finally, once the pandemic is over, there will surely be serious stock-taking and national and international audits of how the crisis was handled by governments. Transparency groups will most certainly use the RTI/FOI Acts to assess government accountability. The Information Commission of Canada has rightly warned: "Because it is impossible to implement measures to ensure transparency retroactively, now is the time for government institutions to ensure that appropriate decision-making documentation safeguards and practices are in place."

Despite the setbacks, public sentiments expressed during the crisis raise hopes that RTI/FOI regimes worldwide will rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic with greater grit and energy.

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ACROSS

- 1 Book part
- 5 "Gone With the Wind"
- 9 Used a stopwatch
- 10 Make Suitable
- 12 Give a speech
- 13 Barber's tool
- 14 Taking it easy
- 16 "Where did -- wrong?"
- 17 School near Windsor
- 18 2012 candidate
- 21 Decimal base
- 22 Mechanic's place
- 23 Stunned
- 24 Namely
- 26 Hockey's Bobby
- 29 Coloring need
- 30 Gobi setting
- 31 Columnist Smith
- 32 Looking intently
- 34 Musical set in Argentina
- 37 Swear
- 38 Penalized
- 39 Old newsman
- 40 Like some wines
- 41 Dick Tracy's love

DOWN

- 1 Buccaneer
- 2 Warring woman
- 3 Arrive
- 4 Genesis garden
- 5 Road goo
- 6 Nabokov novel
- 7 Tearing down
- 8 Orbital point
- 9 Apartment sign
- 11 Hector's home
- 15 Pasture activity
- 19 Metal sources
- 20 Fuming
- 22 Spanish cat
- 23 Week part
- 24 Quiz show fodder
- 25 Frat torture
- 26 Egyptian god
- 27 Fries of suds
- 28 Wild party
- 29 Staff symbol
- 30 Blue hue
- 33 Bank statement
- No.
- 35 Golf peg
- 36 Throw in

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BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER

BEETLE GIVES IT HIS ALL AND THEN SOME


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WHO ELSE GOOFS OFF 110%?

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EATER MANGA
ELI IPA GIN
DEVOUR CUES
DENMOTHER
EPIPIE
MOTHERWIT
BONO LAYMAN
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