

Bangladesh’s rice production and stock satisfactory

Govt should now focus on steady supply of other food items

At a time when people are worried about the possibility of food shortage in the country, as the UN has warned the world about the possibility of multiple famines as the most devastating effect of the novel coronavirus pandemic, it is reassuring to learn that Bangladesh has sufficient food grains in stock to feed its people for the next six months. According to experts and government sources, after the bumper Boro harvest across the country, the nation is unlikely to face any cereal shortage in the near future.

In the fiscal 2018-19, Boro accounted for 54 percent of total rice production while Aman brought 38 percent and Aus contributed the rest 8 percent to the annual rice basket. Thus, after the Boro harvest is complete, if proper incentives can be given to the farmers to encourage cultivation of Aman and Aus, we can also have bumper Aman and Aus harvests, unless there is any natural calamity. The good news is, the agriculture ministry has already declared Tk 9 crore of incentive to provide seed and fertiliser to small and marginal farmers to encourage cultivation during the Aus season. The government has also reduced irrigation charge by half for the pumps owned by Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation.

According to the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), Bangladesh’s annual consumption requirement of rice is 3.5 crore tonnes and last year’s total production was higher than the estimated demand. Besides rice, our wheat production is also satisfactory. Until May 11, rice stock at public godowns was 9.97 lakh tonnes and wheat stock 2.82 lakh tonnes. Thus, there is little chance that we will face any cereal shortage in the coming days.

So, the government should now focus on ensuring sufficient production of other food items including fish, livestock and vegetables, and their adequate supplies in the market. Fish farmers and vegetable growers have been facing a hard time as they are unable to sell their produce because of a lack of buyers and transport crisis created by the shutdown. With efficient handling of all these issues, we can hope that the country will not face any food crisis during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Drug trade in the time of corona

Comprehensive strategy needed to combat its rise

We are concerned that drug pedlars are seizing the opportunity of lax monitoring by law enforcement agencies to become active again in different parts of the capital during the ongoing lockdown. A report published in this daily on May 16 highlighted how drug trading has resumed in various densely populated areas some of which are Covid-19 hotspots, including Mohammapur’s Geneva Camp, Karwan Bazar and Jheelpur slum in Mirpur. Regular raids by the police, Rab and the Department of Narcotics Control have stopped as a result of the lockdown, and the number of cases filed have decreased dramatically from 1,400 in March to 123 in April, according to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

We understand that the current situation poses great difficulty for law enforcement, and that conducting raids and searches pose health risks for all parties concerned. But given the uncertainty over when life would return to normal, law enforcement must strategise how to tackle the proliferation of drug trade in the capital despite the many challenges, if it wants to retain the progress it has made over the last two years in the war against drugs. Besides, with customers regularly visiting these Covid-19 hotspots, there are also concerns about rapid spread of the virus both within the slums as well as in the wider communities. Monitoring, while maintaining safety protocols, is thus of urgent importance.

The pandemic has had an adverse impact on the mental health of people from all segments of society. In the absence of any support system, some of them may turn to drugs to ease their pain and suffering. Policymakers should also address this lacking in our healthcare system both in the short and long term if it wants to eradicate the demand for drugs. Additionally, low-income groups, particularly women and children, who are desperate for money in this lockdown, are susceptible to being used as mules by drug lords. Previous reports have shown how, once one enters this trade, it becomes impossible to get out of the vicious cycle of arrests, poverty and unemployment. As such, it is also imperative to ensure social safety nets for these marginalised groups to ensure that they are not drawn into a life of crime and mayhem.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR


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Bumper Boro harvest

It is heartening to know from a recent report published in this daily that Bangladesh ranks third in global rice production and that we have ample supply of food-grain stock that will suffice for the next six months.

The government took a very good initiative by deciding to purchase paddy directly from the farmers. If the procurement system can sustain, then it will be beneficial for the farmers as well because we have noticed earlier how some greedy middlemen like millers and traders have deprived farmers of their benefits.

Afzal Hossain, Tangail



ABU SAEED KHAN

INTERNET is keeping the world somewhat walking in the darkest hours of the Covid-19 pandemic. And mobile telephony is the tool that is keeping Bangladesh limping.

Defining broadband while defying reality

The National Broadband Policy, 2009 has defined broadband as Internet connections with minimum 128 Kbps of speed. Seven years later, in 2016, the government upgraded it to a minimum 5 Mbps of connectivity. Two years later, in 2018, the authorities doubled that speed to 10 Mbps. Therefore, fixed or mobile internet connections below this speed are “officially” not broadband in Bangladesh.

Broadband was frequently redefined at the demand side leaving the supply side in disarray, thanks to the International Long Distance Telecommunication Service (ILDTS) Policy, which keeps wrecking the broadband supply chain since its enactment in 2007 followed by its amendment in 2010. This policy tags licenses for each wholesale service and effectively forbids foreign investments.

Broadband’s coffin had the last nail hammered in when sharing and

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SUDIPTO MUKERJEE

DISASTER resilience and climate change have been and continue to be high on the development agenda for Bangladesh. Significant investments have been made over the years through infrastructural interventions, policy changes, institutional capacity building and awareness campaigns. In turn, each passing year has yielded impressive dividends with the country and its people growing increasingly adept at handling natural disasters with fewer casualties and better rebuilding.

But now Bangladesh is faced with an unprecedented crisis. The nation has not had to battle anything remotely akin to the coronavirus pandemic in its recent history. The dominance of the informal sector in the economy paired with lack of adequate preparedness is revealing some serious underlying fragilities which pose far-reaching implications for developing countries such as Bangladesh and most of its South Asian neighbours.

Initially considered a public health crisis, this has quickly become a multidimensional humanitarian crisis, affecting each and every aspect of public life—in fact the collateral impacts of the outbreak in the form of millions becoming the “new poor” within weeks, going hungry and impoverished, and social discontent growing as prevention measures hit at the roots of culture and traditional practice have far outstripped the numbers directly affected by the disease.

Mere survival has become a challenge for those reliant on daily incomes, and those living in urban slums or remote areas. There are thousands who were never classified as being under the poverty line, such as barbers and rickshaw-pullers, who are now struggling to live day to day. Then there are several thousand blue collar workers in the lower to middle class who may not be able to return to their jobs in the immediate future. Many from these socio-income groups will very soon get affected and become tomorrow’s poor.

While it is universally agreed that speed is of the essence, it is important that the multi-sectoral nature of the crisis should drive an integrated response, fed by reliable and transparent information. Here data governance becomes an issue to reflect upon—as the culture of data sharing is yet to be embedded institutionally.

Although this is one of the biggest crisis the world has ever seen, lessons from similar public health induced multi-dimensional humanitarian disasters should be studied. Some of the key lessons from the 2014 Ebola Outbreak and subsequent recovery that I imbibed as a frontline responder can help point to

WORLD INFORMATION SOCIETY DAY

Broadband landscaping in post-Covid-19 Bangladesh

deploying of optical fiber among the mobile operators and internet service providers were forbidden on July 7, 2011. This infrastructure sharing guideline is so draconian that a high official of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) publicly denounced it in 2015. “Infrastructures

subscribers’ number.

Ray of hope

Meanwhile, the National Telecommunication Policy, 1998 was revised after two decades of procrastination and the National Telecommunication Policy 2018 (NTP 2018) was finally born. Thankfully,



sharing should be driven by market matrix, not mandated,” remarked Director General Md Wahid-Ul-Zaman in a research note. Yet the authorities remained unmoved.

As a result, mobile industry now battles a paradox—operators serving higher subscribers have lesser mobile towers (BTS) plugged with optical fiber and the country has plunged into a deep mobile broadband divide, as *The Daily Star* has reported. Bangladesh also struggles with slow internet. Speed-wise in 2019, it had ranked 130 among 140 countries in mobile internet while its position was 101 among 177 countries for fixed internet, according to Ookla. BTRC never publishes the broadband (10 Mbps and above)

it supersedes all preceding policies including the suicidal ILDTs Policy.

The NTP 2018 has five guiding principles: i) open and competitive market; ii) universal access; iii) effective governance; iv) appropriate regulation; and v) being visionary. These are crucial to achieving broadband penetration targets, as fixed in the NTP 2018. They are in short term (by 2020): fixed and mobile broadband penetration will be 30 percent; mid-term (by 2023): achieve 70 percent broadband penetration; and long term (by 2027): 100 percent of the population will enjoy broadband.

These targets are unachievable, not because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but due to the aforementioned policies.

Informal regulation and targeted regulation have also flattened investors’ confidence. Formally meddling with mobile tower rental, as reported by *The Daily Star*, is akin to informal rent seeking. Choking the wholesale internet bandwidth as a regulatory countermeasure was, in fact, against the consumers’ interest as well as unprecedented in the history of regulation.

Fiber in food for thought

Assigning radio frequency for access and transmission networks was required to launch 2G (1997) and 3G (2013) mobile services. But extensive deployment of optical fiber is essential to achieving 4G mobile broadband targets. And it is impossible to imagine the launch of 5G networks without highly ubiquitous optical fiber transmission system. Massive optical fiber transmission is also a non-negotiable issue to achieve the “Network development and connectivity targets” of NTP 2018, as mentioned above.

Distance learning, working from home, virtual court, etc., are becoming a part of the new normal in Bangladesh. Therefore, the country will face a massive crisis unless “open access” principle is immediately applied across the supply chain of broadband. And NTP 2018 is the most effective instrument to achieve that goal.

Optical fiber is the artery of the digital world. But 80 percent of its cost goes to civil works, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The ITU has also found that the payback period of an optical fiber project is 15 years. Therefore, predictable regulation is the best subsidy to support the ubiquitous deployment of such capital intensive infrastructure, even amidst the prevailing difficulties. And that’s all the technology sector of Bangladesh badly needs to revive, survive and thrive during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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On the path to overcoming the crisis: Challenges and considerations

important considerations.

Firstly, we must act speedily, and always maintain transparency and accuracy of information. This is crucial as crises tend to shake citizens’ confidence, and ensuring their trust is critical for an effective campaign.

Next, both the response and recovery demanded behavioural change to minimise impacts and avert future crisis. Efforts to bring such change were more effective with closer community engagement, which helps sensitise response and recovery to local norms and practical needs. This required engagement with local and religious leadership who have great influence over their communities. With good information and greater awareness, communities tend to own up to the fight and after that, success quickly follows.

drawn up before; there are no ready-made solutions. While the government will need to bring well-resourced programmes and policies for accelerated recovery into the five-year planning frame, United Nations with UNDP as the overall technical lead is also offering support to all affected countries.

Multi-sectoral recovery interventions has to include helping the health sector stabilise; assisting the worst-hit people to weather the crisis; restoring small businesses so they can provide access to livelihoods, and prompt restoration of basic services such as children’s education. All of these will bolster social stability.

The pandemic has resulted in more inequality than ever before, and has also highlighted the heavy price the planet has been paying for unsustainable economic growth. The UN Secretary General has



People go through a disinfection tunnel installed by Artoonad, a volunteer organisation, as a preventive measure amid the coronavirus disease outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 16, 2020.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

The highest attention should be given to the population segments most disproportionately affected. Alongside this, building a resilient private sector, especially small businesses, can help ensure a swifter and more sustainable economic recovery.

The final lesson was the state’s acknowledgment that such a crisis is a fuel for social discontent and instability, therefore all response and recovery measures should not be driven by heavy-handed administrative and public security measures.

To stop poverty from grappling Bangladesh, we need plans for immediate recovery that will feed into longer-term plans. But such plans have never been

renewed a call for global solidarity and appealed for recovery pathways to clean, green, and more responsible consumption.

UNDP has been a longstanding partner of Bangladesh in various key areas of development, from addressing urban poverty to climate change to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Our work here has helped take Bangladesh forward in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but now, we must rethink our approach in achieving them within the 2030 target. In fact, the SDGs are more important now than ever—social discrimination and inequality is on the rise, making SDG-10 a top priority. Meanwhile, this crisis and the subsequent shutdown has shown the

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importance of letting nature into our lives, to allow it to heal, increasing the priority of environmental and conservational goals.

Along with the wider UN system, UNDP with generous support from UK-DFID, USAID, Swedish SIDA, DANIDA, Australian DFAT, the EU, Canadian GAC, philanthropic foundations and several private sector partners is already working to support the poor across Bangladesh, while also trying to better prioritise response and recovery, and learning new lessons.

We are realising the critical need for proper coordination not just within the public sector but also between the public and private sectors. I have always maintained from my own experience that such coordination needs to be “dedicated, full-time, and necessarily empowered to be decisive”. With improved coordination the speed and effectiveness will undoubtedly increase, enabling better risk-sharing between public and private sectors as the debate on “lives versus livelihoods” hits centre-stage.

This pandemic is telling us to entirely rethink development. This will require unlearning many of the old ways and adopting brand new approaches that make humankind more equal, inclusive and responsible towards each other and the planet. This will also help us seize opportunities for accelerated national development, consequently becoming better at managing these unprecedented shocks. And so, in closing, I am reminded of Alvin Toffler the futurist American author of “Future Shock”, who famously said, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

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