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WFP’s appeal to help Bangladesh

Govt needs financial assistance from its development partners

We appreciate the World Food Programme (WFP) issuing an urgent call for USD 320 million to provide food and financial assistance to the most vulnerable families in Bangladesh during this pandemic. According to the UN, of the amount, the WFP will need USD 200 million for its Covid-19 response in Bangladesh and with the remaining USD 120 million, it will help the Rohingya refugees for the next six months. The organisation has also warned that Covid-19 may reverse the development gains made by Bangladesh in the last 50 years—a reality that Bangladesh must face courageously and prudently. As the Covid-19 outbreak in the country has entered its third month with an alarming rise in the number of infections and deaths, the government has extended the ongoing shutdown till May 30. Although businesses and markets have reopened in a limited capacity, it has not helped the poor wage earners, who have been living in extreme poverty since the beginning of the shutdown on March 26. Millions of people across the country are now unable to meet their basic needs due to the lockdown and restrictions on movement. They are now completely dependent on the government and other aid and voluntary organisations’ assistance to survive.

We think the government has been doing a good job in providing the necessary assistance to the poor through its relief operations and cash incentives, despite there being some irregularities in the process. It has started providing cash assistance to 50 lakh poor families and has also provided assistance to the businesses and the farmers through special stimulus packages. However, for a country like Bangladesh with a large number of its population living in poverty and extreme poverty, it is not possible to handle the situation resulting from the pandemic on its own.

Bangladesh needs urgent financial assistance from its development partners to cope with the economic impacts of Covid-19. The WFP and other UN agencies have already been assisting Bangladesh in this regard. If the WFP gets the necessary fund, it can help ensure food security for families in rural areas and urban slums. Funds are also needed to ensure healthcare services and safe living conditions for the Rohingyas since a number of Rohingyas have been reported to be infected with coronavirus recently. As time is of the essence we hope Bangladesh’s development partners will respond promptly to provide the necessary assistance to help the country cope with the impacts of Covid-19.

Who will protect the protectors?

Address the effect of pandemic among law enforcers

We notice with abject dismay the continuous and increased number of COVID-19 positive cases among police personnel. According statistics of the Police Headquarters, at least 241 of them were infected across the country in the last 24 hours till the noon of May 16—the highest ever number of positive cases detected among the police force in a single day. This takes the total number to 2,382.

This makes for more than 12 percent of the total people infected in the entire country and nearly half of them are from the DMP. But that may not, unfortunately, be the entire picture since we do not know whether all the members of the force have been tested for the virus.

It was nearly two weeks ago to the day that we commented in this very column, highlighting the dangers posed to the law enforcing agencies due to the nature of their job during such a pandemic. We had suggested that action be taken quickly to at least mitigate, if not to stop entirely, the chances of their getting infected. While action has been taken in terms of their treatment, what we feel is equally important is to reduce the likelihood of their getting infected. How can the members of the police maintain social distance in barracks which are packed like sardines? The cramped living conditions provide fertile ground for propagation of the virus. Should all of them not be wearing full PPE while mingling with the public in performing their duty? But have they been provided enough protection gear? If the barracks are cramped can they not be accommodated in tents with appropriate space to ensure safety? Should all the members of the police force, particularly of the DMP, not be tested for the virus immediately, and those infected quarantined?

Every infection advances in geometrical progression, and the figure of 2,382 positive cases means much more than what it shows. The authorities should move fast to arrest the worrying rise.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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‘Ek Takar Dokan’ a good call

I was overjoyed to learn about a Savar based youth organisation named Chobighor, and its timely initiative to help the needy during such difficult times. As many of the residents in Savar have become unemployed as a result of the shutdown, around 20 university students who are members of Chobighor decided to start an aid programme by selling essential food items such as rice, flour, sugar, baby foods, etc., since the beginning of Ramadan and all for Tk 1 only.

So that the needy don’t see the aid as handouts, the members have decided to charge the minimum value instead of offering it for free. I think more young people should come forward in a similar way to help the underprivileged across the country.

Abu Afsar, Dhaka



FAHMIDA KHATUN and SYED YUSUF SAADAT

THE coronavirus pandemic has bluntly exposed how a large number of people across the world are susceptible to health and economic shocks. It is also clear how vulnerable groups in many countries still remain precariously unprotected without any form of social protection. The International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) asserts that social protection is a human right. It mentions that social protection is a necessity for development, a tool for reducing social exclusion, an investment in workers’ empowerment and a mechanism that is conducive towards gradual formalisation of employment. The recommendation calls upon countries to establish and maintain social protection floors, and progressively make the transition to higher levels of social security.

Despite ILO’s recommendation, 55 percent of the global population, or around four billion people worldwide, did not have access to any form of social protection in 2017. To make things worse, social protection coverage is lower in less developed regions of the world. As many as 61 percent people in the Asia and Pacific region and 82 percent people in Africa did not have access to any social protection in 2017. Nonetheless, it appears that we are at the right juncture in history to expand the global reach of universal social protection, since many developing countries are as rich today as some developed countries were when they first introduced their social protection systems.

It is commonly thought that providing non-contributory universal social protection floors in developing countries with large numbers of vulnerable people is very expensive. However, it has been shown that for a sample of 101 developing countries, the average cost of providing universal social protection floor is only 1.6 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Cost estimates for a smaller sample of 34 lower middle-income countries and 23 low-income countries show that universal social protection floors would cost only 2.1 percent of the combined GDP of those 57 countries, or only 0.23 percent of world GDP. This is a rather meagre cost, compared to the benefits of universal social protection floors. This amount would directly help 9.5 percent of the world’s population, including 103 million severely disabled people, 153 million elderly and 364 million children.

Using ILO’s Social Protection Floors Cost Calculator, we estimate that the cost of providing cash benefits equal to 25 percent of the national poverty line to all children less than five-years-old would be only 1.04 percent of GDP. On

the other hand, providing USD 1 per day at purchasing power parity (PPP) to all children less than five-years-old in Bangladesh would cost 1.24 percent of GDP. Ironically, only 35 percent of children worldwide, 28 percent of children in Asia, and 29.4 percent of children in Bangladesh were covered by social protection benefits in 2017.

In case of people with disabilities, only 27.8 percent worldwide and 18.5 percent in Bangladesh, were protected with benefits in 2017. Our estimates show that the cost of providing cash benefits equal to 100 percent of the national poverty line to all persons with severe disabilities would be only 0.93 percent of GDP in Bangladesh. Alternatively, the cost of providing USD 2 at PPP per day to all persons with severe disabilities in Bangladesh would be equivalent to 0.55 percent of GDP.

Worldwide 41 percent of women with newborns received maternity benefits in

case of Bangladesh, the cost of providing cash benefits equal to 100 percent of the national poverty line to all persons aged 65 years and above would be 2.18 percent of GDP. On the other hand, providing USD 2 per day at PPP to all persons aged 65 years and above in Bangladesh would cost 1.30 percent of GDP.

Using the same method, we also find that the cost of providing unemployment support in Bangladesh, such as the 100-day Employment Generation Programme, equal to 100 percent of the national poverty line for 100 days per year for one person at working age per vulnerable household would be 2.14 percent of GDP. And, providing USD 2 per day at PPP for 100 days per year for one person at working age per vulnerable household would cost 1.27 percent of GDP.

The fiscal challenge in Bangladesh vis-à-vis social security financing is enormous. The vision of reaching universal targets, would depend crucially



Universal social protection resolves the problem of beneficiary targeting by simply including all relevant individuals under the aegis of social protection.

PHOTO: WORLD BANK

2017, while in Bangladesh the share of women with newborns receiving maternity benefits was only 20.9 percent in 2017. The cost of providing universal maternity benefits equivalent to 100 percent of the national poverty line to all mothers during four months around childbirth, in Bangladesh, would be only 0.30 percent of GDP. We also find that providing maternity cash benefits equal to USD 1 per day at PPP to all mothers in Bangladesh during four months around childbirth would cost only 0.09 percent of GDP.

Although pensions for the elderly are the most commonly provided form of social protection in the world, 32 percent of the elderly population worldwide, and 66 percent of the elderly population in Bangladesh, are still not covered with any social protection benefits. In the

on how the many elements of social safety net programmes are financed and implemented. Although the design of the National Social Security Strategy of Bangladesh is to gradually encourage growth of social insurance and contributory financing, the latter would need a prolonged period of many measures before one can start envisaging a reduction in transfers and social safety net programme interventions.

Nevertheless, the budgetary burden to finance the social safety net programmes will continue to be large, given the current levels of extreme poverty and vulnerability in the economy, especially of underprivileged groups and regions. Fiscal space will also need to expand to build the capacity and institutions needed towards implementation of the National

Reducing the digital divide is vital, so is producing responsible citizens



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

DURING a Joe Rogan podcast a year ago, Elon Musk, the founder of SpaceX and co-founder of Tesla Inc., audaciously said that many human beings alive today have already become “cyborgs”. Musk

went on to explain that those who have a smartphone hooked up to the internet and the ability to properly utilise the two are more powerful than an ordinary human being ever was, simply due to the extraordinary amount of more information and tools they have access to. This digital divide, in Musk’s opinion, is far more significant than any other technological gap that has existed in human history.

Due to the broad lockdown restrictions enforced across nations and societies over the past months, many companies and businesses have been forced to operate digitally, leaving those who lack the necessary technological access even further behind. And this condition applies beyond the workplace, as distance learning, too, has not been possible for everyone. Similarly, certain businesses have flourished—especially the global tech giants like Amazon, Apple, Facebook, etc.—while others, mostly small and medium businesses, have floundered.

As business, education, entertainment and other social sectors and needs have been catapulted onto the digital space to continue operations, those who had greater digital influence have naturally made gains. And the same applies even for countries and also in regards to the labour market. Despite the pandemic forcing employees, employers and businesses to adapt to the circumstances by becoming more digital in a way that was postponed or previously deemed impossible, the prevailing situation has not necessarily provided the ideal

conditions for such a shift.

For example, due to borders closing down and the movement of goods becoming more difficult, many businesses perhaps did not get the opportunity to acquire the devices and other items needed to function solely on the digital sphere. And because of the sophistication of it all, it isn’t very likely that individuals would all of a sudden have become experts at using digital devices—if they weren’t already.

Which is why I would argue that COVID-19 has simply changed the perception of how we view the need for increased digital training. In reality, the writing has been on the wall for quite some time. But we ignored it. As a result, we now find ourselves in this predicament.

Even before the crisis started, businesses were complaining that our workers lacked the skills they were looking for, at the same time as youth unemployment



All of these patterns and more, give rise to the fear that the ongoing pandemic will increase the digital divide even further going into the future, while it is possible that many in-person activities will continue to be affected in the post-COVID-19 world.

The need to acquire digital skills might have multiplied during this pandemic, but such training, which affects both the generations that are currently in school and those in the labour force, takes time. Therefore, a country like ours, which lags behind its competitor in terms of having such a skilled workforce, could get further relegated in the global competitiveness ladder in the immediate aftermath of the crisis.

and unemployment among the highly educated remained elevated. To solve this mismatch, many had called for increased technical and vocational training. And as we have now come to see, there was definitely some justification to it. So in order to remain competitive (or regain the competitiveness we may potentially lose) in the long run, it is now more crucial than ever that the government and private sector invest heavily in digital and other technologies and also train the workforce to be able to properly absorb and utilise them.

However, while it is important to provide increased digital training and retrain our current and future workforce to become more tech-savvy, we must not

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Social Security Strategy. Equally, statutory provisions that are likely to come with National Social Security Strategy and the building of social floor, will require financial provisions. For instance, attempts should be made to widen social insurance coverage in the informal sector, and informal enterprises.

Fiscal space in Bangladesh is currently restricted by the very low revenue-GDP ratio, which is low not only compared to many of the Asian countries, but also compared to many sub-Saharan countries. Apart from additional tax and non-tax revenues, expansion of fiscal space is also dependent on reprioritisation and better rationalisation of public expenditures. More significantly, pressure on social safety net expenditures will diminish only when there is a steady job growth in the economy, especially in the private sector.

Building a social protection floor will critically depend on how a rising employer-employee contribution will supplement social assistance transfers, and eventually reinforce and institutionalise a public social insurance system. This would be central to the realisation of target 1.3 of Sustainable Development Goals and of the National Social Security Strategy by 2030.

Beneficiary targeting, that is, bringing in the right group of people, has been a major weakness of social safety net programmes in Bangladesh. Universal social protection resolves the problem of beneficiary targeting by simply including all relevant individuals under the aegis of social protection.

The corona pandemic clearly suggests that it is time for Bangladesh to make the transition away from random discretionary safety net programmes and towards universal social protection floors.

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lose sight of the bigger picture. As CS Lewis, a noted futurist of his own time, said: “If education is beaten by training, civilisation dies... the lesson of history is that civilisation is a rarity, attained with difficulty and easily lost... It is the liberal arts, not vocational training, that preserves civilisation by producing reasonable men and responsible citizens.”

And, as much as this crisis has laid bare our vulnerabilities in the digital sphere, it has also exposed another kind of crisis that we have had for some time now: the lack of reasonable men and responsible citizens we have been producing.

Just think about how many patients hospitals have turned away to their eventual deaths recently; how the government failed to provide doctors with enough PPEs while asking them to fight on the frontlines against death; how people abandoned their loved ones at the slightest fear that they might be infected; how countless numbers of educated and uneducated people alike, said that this is all down to the fact that “Bangali jati to emoni.” Does this sound like something a reasonable and responsible citizen would do? Or the doings of someone looking for a cheap excuse to cover up their own irresponsibility and unreasonableness.

It isn’t difficult to see that we have fallen behind in many ways as a nation, including when it comes to investing in technology and our workforce. It never was, even before the outbreak. Any reasonable and responsible citizen could have seen it. Had we had enough of the two, perhaps the rest would have been taken care of automatically.

Before the next crisis hits, or before we even get out of the present one, there are a number of things that we must do. Perhaps what is most urgent is becoming and producing reasonable and responsible citizens, lest our civilisation, too, collapses, with or without any external crisis like this coronavirus pandemic.

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