

Govt's Boro procurement policy needs a change

Buying paddy directly from farmers will ensure fair price for them

A research conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that Boro farmers can get a fair price for their produce, if the government buys paddy directly from the growers instead of rice from millers. The study commissioned by the agriculture ministry also suggests that the step will increase the market price of Boro paddy during the harvest season. By analysing last year's Boro procurement data, the researchers found that the market price of Boro paddy could have increased by 45 percent, had the government purchased only paddy from farmers for its rice stock.

While 81.1 percent of total government's rice procurement was from the millers last year, only 18.9 percent of rice in the form of paddy was procured from the farmers. And only 1.34 percent of all Boro farmers could sell their produce to the government.

Every year, despite having a bumper Boro harvest, the majority of our farmers have to count losses while the rice millers make huge profits. This is a well-known fact and the study has just found out the details of the ground realities. The IFPRI has also made some commendable suggestions as to how to protect farmers' interests through the government's procurement programmes. In order to ensure fair prices for farmers, the government should fix the prices of paddies with different moisture content, buy paddy from farmers at the local supply depots and get those husked at rice mills, set a maximum selling limit for farmers so that small farmers and sharecroppers can participate in the procurement process, etc. Moreover, only the government-designated rice millers should transport the paddy from the depots to the mills.

These steps, if taken, will not only increase the market price of paddy during the harvest season which will benefit farmers, but will also lower the retail price of rice in the market which will benefit the low-income people, particularly the urban poor. We request the government to consider the suggestions made by the study and help protect farmers' interests.

This is not the time to hike bus fares

People are already suffering enough!

THE Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association has demanded that bus fares be doubled if they are to maintain safety protocols and social distancing in the vehicles, as the lockdown on public transport is lifted on Monday. At a time when lower and middle classes are already struggling to weather the economic hardships brought about by Covid-19, this demand is inconsiderate, to say the least. Passengers, an overwhelming majority of whom are likely to be hard-strapped for disposable income in this crisis, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to bear this additional expense. Moreover, we would like to remind both the bus owners and the government that this is a temporary arrangement, but prices, once increased, are likely to be permanent, even when we return to normalcy.

We urge the government to be mindful of the immense financial burdens of people in lower income brackets as the economy braces for a recession, and to take every possible step to ease their daily sufferings. According to a recent study by the Power and Participation Research Centre and Brac Institute of Governance and Development, incomes of the ultra-poor, moderately poor and vulnerable non-poor in Bangladesh have fallen by 70 percent due to the coronavirus outbreak. The lower middle and middle income households have also seen a drastic reduction in their incomes, with thousands unemployed or suffering losses in their small businesses. Under the circumstances, rather than pass on the buck to commuters, bus owners should step up and take on the additional burden. Let this be their contribution to the economy—and to the people—during this unprecedented economic crisis. Additionally, with oil prices having drastically fallen in the international market, we see no reason why bus owners should not be allowed to reap its benefits and save operational costs.

We also worry that bus owners will use this excuse of maintaining social distance to hike costs but will continue to fill the buses to their full capacity. The transport sector, unfortunately, has not been held to account for its many misdeeds over the years, but this lack of accountability and monitoring must end if we are to ensure any semblance of safety for passengers, many of whom are likely to belong to groups who are at higher risk of contracting the virus.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Maintain safety at all costs

Amid the ongoing crisis, the government has decided to discontinue the nationwide general holidays keeping the livelihoods of the people in mind. Starting from June 1, everything will slowly start to operate like before, or so we hope. But I cannot help think that even with the restrictions in place, the carelessness of people far surpassed our expectations, then how will they behave once the lockdown has been discontinued?

Therefore, ensuring that everybody abides by the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Health while travelling to work is of utmost importance. Once at work, everyone should strictly maintain social distancing and proper hygiene. Without supervision, I think the consequences may turn out to be disastrous. I know it is not possible for the government alone to control the pandemic and we as a people must thus step forward and be responsible ourselves. I hope this step to restart our economy proves successful given we all proceed in a progressive and planned manner.

Nazia Amin, Dhaka

Post-Corona "New Normal" in Schools

15 percent of national budget must go to education recovery



MANZOOR AHMED

WE have to talk about the post-corona time, even though Bangladesh has not reached the peak in infection and deaths caused by the pandemic. It will come to an end or at least limp

to a decline in the near future. Meanwhile, we have to design a smart national response and a recovery plan. Protecting the fragile progress in children's education must be a part of the smart national recovery.

Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) undertook a rapid survey of the field situation on Covid-19 education impact. The aim of the online survey carried out between mid-April and mid-May was to gauge the perception of these education stakeholders on the situation and its impact and implications.

Responses were received from 115 NGOs engaged in education activities and 11 teachers' organisations. The findings of the survey and recommendations based on it were shared in a webinar on May 18.

The survey revealed serious concerns about the risk of reversal of the progress made in recent years in education and setting back the efforts on the quality, equity and inclusion objectives. The findings pointed to long-standing weaknesses in the education system which have been aggravated now by the crisis.

Dropout of children from school would rise according to 85 percent of respondents. Child labour will increase hampering education of children, thought 71 percent respondents. Eighty percent felt absenteeism and irregular school attendance would rise. Seventy percent respondents found teachers of non-government schools, the vast majority at

School closure is likely to continue until September, if not longer, wiping out much of the school year. The economic, health and psychological effects on students, teachers and families are such that it cannot be a matter of going back to the old routine when the pandemic subsides. A three year education recovery plan is needed to protect the recent progress and prevent setting back children's education due to the

been semester and school exams in many school districts and universities in USA.

If public examinations must be held, they need not be for all the subjects in the curriculum. They can be on fewer key subjects such as Bangla and math for PECE and Bangla, English, math and science for JSC; on a 100-marks paper for each subject, completing the total examination in a short time.

A similar approach can be followed for

The non-formal education programmes for the dropout and those never enrolled in school need to be strengthened.

Tapan Kumar Ghosh, Director General, Bureau of Non-Formal Education said that 100,000 out-of-school students in a "second chance" programme are not able to continue their study at present and the start for a new cohort of 250,000 students is delayed due to the crisis

It was recommended that at least 15



A three year education recovery plan is needed to protect the recent progress and prevent setting back children's education due to the pandemic's impact.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

The recovery has to take us to a "new normal" that mitigates the pre-existing weaknesses now exposed, rather than take us back to business-as-usual that left many children poorly served.

the secondary level and at least a third at the primary level, are in deep anxiety about not receiving salaries or even losing their job.

Analysing the respondents' perception of problems and priorities, the study team recommended measures for protection and recovery of the education system. Two main areas of actions proposed are about a medium term recovery plan and the necessary budgetary support for this plan.

pandemic's impact.

The fragilities of the system laid bare by the closure of schools and the difficulties of reaching and supporting students should be reflected in the recovery strategy. The recovery has to take us to a "new normal" that mitigates the pre-existing weaknesses now exposed, rather than take us back to business-as-usual that left many children poorly served.

The post-pandemic recovery plan should emphasise teaching and learning, including extra classes (offering support to schools and incentives to teachers for this purpose). The disruption of academic calendar, completing lessons, adjusting exams and adjusting vacations should focus on recouping the loss of learning time, and ensuring student's return to school and participation in learning—not just going back to the old routine.

The focus must shift away from public examinations and testing (such as PECE at the end of grade 5 and JSC at the end of grade 8) and many formal periodic examinations in the school. The next round of these may be cancelled or held in an abridged form. It should be remembered that the school's primary job is to support students to learn; testing is secondary and must not distract students and teachers from learning. Secondary level public examinations (GCE) has been cancelled this year in UK as have

SSC and HSC exams and considered as a strategy for examination reform. An expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Education made recommendations in 2018 along this line, but these have not received due consideration.

Expanding scope of school meal, stipends, health check and mentoring of students were recommended. Md Fashiullah, Director General, Directorate of Primary Education, noted that the amount of monthly stipends for primary education students is to be raised by about 50 percent.

Investments should be made on making online and ICT-based learning a regular feature in schools. ICT infrastructure, connectivity, broad-band access, availability of devices such as tablets, ed-tech support and ed-tech training for teachers are necessary for this purpose. Asif Saleh, Executive Director of Brac, speaking at the webinar, mentioned plans for multiple shifts and a blended approach (mixing on-line and face-to-face instruction) for schools Brac runs.

Plans should be made for all education institutions to become free wi-fi hotspots for students and teachers. A collaboration among the telecommunication regulatory agency (BTRC), mobile phone providers, A2I project of the Ministry of Science and Technology and the education authorities is urgently needed to this end.

percent of the new national budget for 2020-21 should be allocated to education to support the education recovery plan, particularly for the elements noted above. Khondaker Golam Moazzem, Reseach Director at Center for Policy Dialogue, supported the recommendation and urged increase both in development and recurring budgets for education. He said this was not the time to cut back the education budget as "lesser priority" or "non-essential" expenditure.

It has been suggested that the success of the recovery plan and proper use of extra funds lie in proper implementation of the proposed steps. Effective implementation would require decentralised planning and management of total primary and secondary education in each upazila involving local administration and close collaboration with non-government and civil society organisations.

Policy support for a "new normal" that serves students better than in the past would be a silver lining in the darkness. Ms Aroma Datta, MP urged at the webinar that the findings and recommendations of the survey be brought to the attention of the prime minister and discussed with the Minister of Education, Dr Dipu Moni.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University and Vice-chair of CAMPE.

On the Front Line of Providing Healthcare

The role of the family doctor

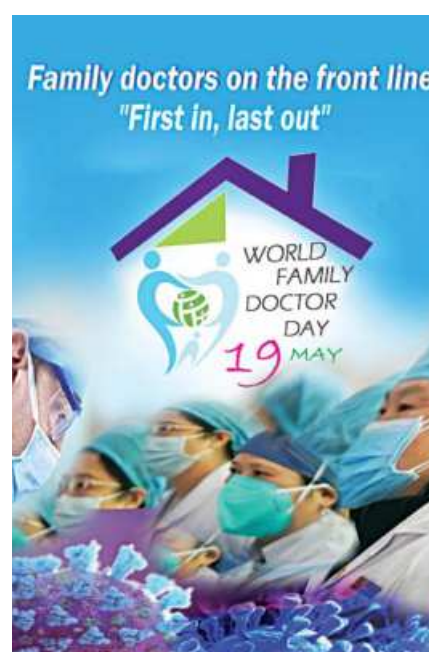
MD KABIR AHMED KHAN

THE world is experiencing an unprecedented health challenge as the global coronavirus pandemic continues to spread. To date, it has spread rapidly in almost all countries in the world, causing the number of cases and deaths to increase exponentially.

While Bangladesh saw the first confirmed case on March 8, 2020 and the rate of infection stayed relatively low through March, we have recently begun to experience an increasing number of new cases and deaths. This pattern matches the experiences of other countries, where a slow start soon turns into uncontrollable upsurge. As we've seen in other countries, this can quickly overwhelm the local health system.

We are facing a significant challenge in combating COVID-19 with lack of access to quality healthcare. Due to insufficient resources and lack of coordination in health sectors, patients are struggling to get healthcare—both to manage COVID-19 but also for other chronic health conditions.

In general, in our country, almost 80 percent of the population still seek their first line of care from informal healthcare providers such as traditional healers or pharmacy owners. For that reason, during a pandemic situation, general people are facing tremendous suffering to get proper and adequate medical support due to a lack of strong primary healthcare delivery



1978, when WHO began its "Health for All" programme, it recognised that strong "primary healthcare" is the key to attain that. A family physician or a family doctor acts as a leader in the front-line of healthcare workers, who provide services to patients of all age groups, and genders. To highlight the role and contribution of family doctors, WONCA (World Organization of Family Doctors), first declared May 19 as World Family Doctors Day (WFDD) in 2010, which has been celebrated all over the world every year. This year WFDD's theme is: "Family doctors on the front line—First in, Last out".

A family doctor is a specialist physician, who is educated and trained in the discipline of family medicine. Worldwide, family medicine is also recognised as a distinct academic discipline which is imparted through structured residency training, concerned with the total healthcare of the

individual and the family.

The need of the hour is to understand and incorporate in our healthcare system well-trained family doctors who may form the backbone of our healthcare system. As "Gate Keepers" at primary care facilities, they can improve the cost-effectiveness of healthcare delivery, during this pandemic situation and beyond. This COVID-19 pandemic health challenge has already shown in every country of the world—more in third world countries such as ours—that a well-planned strong primary healthcare delivery system with efficient family doctors working in the grass root level can effectively minimise the devastating health hazards of any outbreak.

So, in the present pandemic situation, the roles and responsibilities of family doctors as primary care physicians are manifold. They can easily maintain the triage at the front line by disease screening, providing telemedicine consultations, training the auxiliary healthcare providers, educating community people, guiding community leaders and assisting the public health authorities. They can act as a family friend and a healthcare advocate in this crisis situation, and can address mental health issues as well. They also can prevent unnecessary burden on hospitals in this resource constraint country of ours.

Dr Lt Colonel (Retd) Md Kabir Ahmed Khan, Consultant Family Medicine, Pravaa Health.

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