

Education sector needs a recovery plan

Mere extension of closures of schools, colleges won't help

THE government has once again extended the closure of all educational institutions including schools and colleges to August 6, in line with ongoing efforts to contain transmission of the coronavirus. A decision in this regard was imminent, and expected by the education sector, with the previously announced closure period expiring on June 15. All educational institutions in the country have been closed since March 17. If current trends in infections and deaths from the coronavirus continue, the closing period may extend well beyond September, which was when the prime minister earlier said might be a possible time for considering a reopening. In fact, experts predict that things will further deteriorate in the coming days. While saving lives without ignoring the economic exigencies of the people is our number-one priority at the moment, one fears the decision to keep students at home for a long time, without coming up with a comprehensive rescue and recovery plan for the education sector, will create formidable challenges.

The government's interventions in education so far have been mostly limited to extending closures and providing basic guidelines and edicts on how to continue virtual learning. The idea of virtual learning worked to some extent but risks falling by the wayside as many students, especially those from poorer families and disadvantaged groups, are finding it difficult to cope with. While universities are devising their own plan to resume semesters, how do we make up for the loss in the studies of the vast number of school and college going children? How do we reduce the inequalities sparked by unequal and insufficient access to online classes and tutorials? What about the mid-year exams, or the HSC exams which have been deferred for an indefinite period? We need an urgent rescue and recovery plan to offset the impacts of the pandemic on education. Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a civil society forum of education NGOs, warned that progress made in the last two decades in education is in danger of being lost due to the immediate and longer-term consequences of Covid-19. Similar alerts have been raised by UNESCO for low and middle income countries. To address this threat, CAMPE had urged the government to initiate a three-year education recovery plan.

Surely, there is a surfeit of ideas about what could be included in such a plan. The government can begin by having experts devise a comprehensive plan that will include our ICT infrastructure, connectivity, broadband access, educational technology support and training for teachers, among other priorities, as necessary components. Some form of selective reopening may be considered in the near future. And of course, the proposed education budget should be reviewed and changed to allocate at least 15 percent of the total budget for education, as experts have demanded, to recover from the learning loss created by Covid-19.

Great strides in producing renewable energy

But reliance on biomass continues

FINDING alternative sources of energy, which would not deplete too quickly over time and would not impose adverse consequences on the environment, has been at the top of the list for our planners; and all the more so since Bangladesh happens to be one of the five fastest growing economies in the world, with an increasing need for energy. Renewable and climate friendly sources of energy are also linked with reducing the greenhouses gases effect and the resultant damaging consequences of climate change, and has, since our Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan was formulated, been identified as one of the goals of Bangladesh, which aimed to generate five percent of its power needs from renewable energy sources by 2015, and 10 percent by 2020.

And a good strategy has borne fruit. According to REN21's Renewables 2020 Global Status Report (GSR) which was released on Monday, Bangladesh has achieved quite a distinction with respect to producing renewable energy, becoming one of the top six countries in terms of generating electricity using solar solutions, and, as of 2017, around eight percent of the country's total power generation capacity was sources from off-grid solar. According to the same, the electricity access in Bangladesh has almost doubled, from only 47 percent in 2010 to about 95 percent in 2019.

But that, unfortunately, is not enough. Even now, more than 80 percent of the households in Bangladesh depend on traditional sources of energy like biomass, coal and kerosene, all having serious consequences on the environment. Therefore, we believe that extra emphasis should be put on, what experts call, renewable pathways. The moot point is whether we can transit to 100 percent renewable sources in a relatively short time. A study in this regard recently has suggested that a shift to 100 percent renewable energy can provide sufficient energy for all at the lowest possible costs. The findings also unveil a high potential for reducing carbon emissions. Meanwhile, the focus of the government should be on ensuring extensive use of off-grid solar and mini-grid technologies, as well as environment friendly, clean cooking facilities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Higher cost of phone usage

Following the proposed budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year, mobile phone users will have to pay higher bills as supplementary duty is set to increase to 15 percent from the existing 10 percent. As a result, users will be charged extra for SMS, voice calls and internet usage. During this pandemic, we have been heavily dependent on mobile usage. People from all walks of life are performing their day to day activities using e-commerce, online banking, online classes, online office, etc. If this proposal is passed, the higher costs will harm everyone, from farmers to students and businessmen, and impede the flow of development and the digitalisation of Bangladesh. I humbly urge the respective authorities to rethink the incremental supplementary duty on mobile phone usage.

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OF MAGIC & MADNESS
BADUZZAMAN BAY

“THERE are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.” This comment by Vladimir Lenin, describing the Bolshevik revolution over 100 years ago, serves as an apt metaphor for the journey Bangladesh has had since March 8, when the country confirmed its first Covid-19 case. It's been 100 days since that fateful spring day—and three months since the day its first Covid-19 death was reported. The official death toll so far from the pandemic has topped 1,200 and the number of infections has crossed 90,000. Bangladesh is now the eighteenth worst-affected country in the world, even ahead of China, where the pandemic began.

These figures help us understand our position in a world ravaged by the coronavirus. What the “curve” doesn't tell you is the price paid in sufferings: the decades' worth of pain, chaos and uncertainty, all endured in just months. For the ordinary folks, there seems to be no end to this Herculean test of endurance. For them, there is only the next turn in the road. The next batch of unaided, unrecognised victims. The next bureaucratic screw-up, leading to even bigger screw-ups.

Any analysis of how the crisis has evolved in the 100 days since the first case will illustrate how Bangladesh's response, like that of most countries, has been shaped by a persisting conflict between opening up the economy and saving lives. As one of the most densely populated countries and simultaneously one of the poorest, it's naturally getting the worst of both worlds: a higher infection rate than comparable countries and a more ravaged economy. With the country's historically underdeveloped and underfunded healthcare system, no one, frankly, expected the government to be fully prepared for a crisis of this magnitude. We have seen stronger systems than that falling apart. But it was, at the least, expected to learn from its mistakes as it went along and judiciously use its limited capacity and resources for a better response. As it turned out, even a lowered expectation was one too many.

So how did a country otherwise used to frequent natural calamities fail so badly in dealing with this disaster? Let's consider four key factors that might explain this.

Ossified bureaucratic/political institutions

After the March 8 disclosure, the government's lukewarm response to the initial warnings about imported Covid-19 cases and a possible spread at the community level served as a sign of things to come. In the subsequent days, we began to see frequent shifts in strategy: a countrywide lockdown imposed; stimulus packages announced and food (and cash) relief distributed; factories allowed to reopen; lockdown withdrawn amid soaring cases. These decisions, suffice to say, were meant to merely ride the beast—not to tame or direct it. There was no carefully laid out plan, no vision for the future.

A big part of why these decisions failed to contain the outbreak is the government's bureaucracy-driven approach with poorly-crafted targets and their equally poor execution. At a time when the system was supposed to be flexible

and more accountable and place itself on a war footing, given the extraordinary circumstances, it allowed itself to be tied down by bureaucratic deadweight, corruption, narrow political interests, and obsessions with pettifogging rules. Meanwhile, it continued to rule out any involvement of private-sector experts at any stage of policy development and execution. Consider, for example, how the Gonoshasthaya Kendra's coronavirus testing kit has been kept in limbo even after three months of its development, or how the voices of reason were snubbed in preparing the proposed budget which, if done right, could give Bangladesh's rescue and recovery plan a big push forward.

TTI and treatment debacles

On April 5, Bangladesh was ranked 117th in the list of countries with the highest cases in the world. Today, within two and a half months, it finds itself in the 18th position. In simple terms, this means those hundred countries that were above us in the ranking have done a better job of containing the spread of the virus. How much of this downward

is crumbling. After mounting reports of Covid-19 and general patients, and those with suspected Covid-19 symptoms, dying without treatment, the High Court, on June 15, ruled that denying treatment to patients would be considered a criminal offence. As well as these TTI and treatment debacles, the government has also drawn sharp criticism for its failure to provide adequate protective equipment for fmedical staff and other frontline workers.

Evasive communication

The other side of this dismal coin is the lack of communication. Communication is highly important in a pandemic situation. Information saves lives. But the government's communications have been mostly evasive and shambolic. From day one, it has failed to provide a coherent account of its plans, policies and capacities. Contradictory numbers of infections and deaths were sometimes given. Then confusion reigned when the nationwide lockdown was imposed, which the government promoted as a “general holiday”. By doing so, it created a perception that emergency lockdown

messaging from the government are vital to create public awareness, which has been key in battling Covid-19 with relative success in Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, as a recent report by Reuters has shown.

Lack of national unity

Could a united health response through public-private partnerships or collaborative policy efforts by major political parties produce a better result? It most certainly could. So far, there has been no sign of such a thing happening. Politicians, like in normal times, continue to bicker over petty issues. People, like in normal times, continue to be divided or disengaged. The administration, like in normal times, continues to cavalierly dismiss scientific solutions. Perhaps the biggest barrier to Bangladesh's success is this business-as-usual approach to the pandemic. Even four months into the outbreak, the ruling Awami League and BNP have failed to find common ground for much-needed national unity. Until they do so, the very urgent need for the creation of a national council or committee on the Covid-19



People disregarding social distancing advice and crowding a street in Fatullah in Narayanganj during the unofficial lockdown in late April.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

plunge for Bangladesh is an organic development, following the natural laws of viral transmission, and how much of it is because of our policy failures and execution blunders is anybody's guess.

Experts say there is a two-stage optimal strategy for dealing with Covid-19: The first stage is a lockdown to stop the spread of the virus; the second involves ending the lockdown step by step. A number of conditions have to be met to graduate from stage one to stage two (and to remain there). Bangladesh has ticked both boxes, but without meeting any of the conditions. The stress is on “any”. For example, one of the conditions for lifting lockdown is building up a decent test, trace and isolate (TTI) infrastructure. Ours is not even remotely comparable. Our stubbornly low levels of testing mean that the actual numbers could be far worse (only around 15,000 samples are tested every day in around 60 labs across the country). Of the 18 countries at the top, only Mexico is conducting fewer tests than Bangladesh. How can we ever hope to check the virus with such a pathetic TTI regime? The healthcare system, meanwhile,

measures were not essentially enforceable. Many people were, and still are, in the dark about what to do when, for example, someone needs to get tested. Or think of the time when garments workers were given mixed messages about resuming work, taking them on a desperate trip through overcrowded ferries that both risked their safety and likely helped spread the virus in far-flung corners of the country. Even now, when the government has reportedly prepared a list of 55 virus hotspots to be categorised as “red zones” and placed under lockdown, there seems to be confusion all around.

Instead of establishing a channel of communication that inspires trust and dispels confusion, the authorities have rather taken regressive measures to curb the free flow of information. Activists, doctors, academics, and journalists are justifiably afraid to speak up, thanks in no small part to the recent spike in lawsuits and other harassment and scare tactics against critics. The cumulative effect of this climate of panic, confusion and distrust amidst a raging pandemic is deeply disconcerting. Free flow of information and clear, effective

emergency would remain unfulfilled. Such a bipartisan council could do a much better job of handling the crisis than the current bureaucracy-led response mechanism. A national unity that brings together citizens and political rivals to face this emergency head-on is an urgent need of the hour.

Endgame

Bangladesh, with its large population and grinding poverty, may seem like a perfect nursery setting for a new virus to take seed and spread uncontrollably. But this doesn't have to be the case, as some cramped cities and relatively poor countries with a better TTI regime and better policies than ours have shown. A properly enforced lockdown, zonal or national, is still our best chance to fight the virus. As a study by a research team at the Imperial College London has recently shown, lockdowns have saved more than three million lives from the coronavirus in Europe. Whatever course Bangladesh takes going forward, one hopes that mistakes made in the first 100 days of Covid-19 will not be repeated in the second.

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Bangladesh can share crucial knowledge on locally led adaptation



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
SALEEMUL HUQ

the current chair and the two previous chairs making collective decisions. Thus, the Minister of Marshall Islands as the previous chair and the Minister of Ethiopia as the chair before, met virtually with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister to formally announce Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as the new leader of the CVF as well as the V20, which is the group of the Finance Ministers of the CVF countries.

At the same time, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has also announced the appointment of Abul Kalam Azad, her previous Principal Secretary, as her Special Envoy for the CVF. This is indeed an excellent decision.

One of the new developments that is also planned during Bangladesh's tenure as chair of the CVF is to set up a regional centre on climate change adaptation in Dhaka, in collaboration with the Global

Centre on Adaptation (GCA) based in the Netherlands.

Over the years, each country that has led the CVF has initiated a centre of excellence to share their knowledge and help in capacity building of other CVF countries, such as a centre on renewable energy in Costa Rica, one on typhoon tracking in Philippines and another one on climate diplomacy in Ethiopia. Bangladesh now has the opportunity to make its Climate Change Centre into a major South-South centre on adaptation, but specifically on locally led adaptation.

Bangladesh was one of the first countries in the world to recognise the importance of climate change to our development. Under the Prime Minister's leadership in 2009, we developed the first Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), which had six pillars and over forty actions identified. Then the Bangladesh Finance Minister set up the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCSTF) to support the actions of the BCCSAP, and each year, has allocated the equivalent of approximately USD 100,000,000 to support the different activities of government agencies as well as civil society groups. Over the last decade, Bangladesh has invested hundreds of millions of its own funding in hundreds of activities around the country, with a special emphasis on supporting the

most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable regions. Government agencies as well as NGOs in Bangladesh have gained a significant knowledge of planning, as well as implementing, adaptation at the local level for different kinds of climate hazards, from floods and cyclones to droughts.

The second body of knowledge and experiences that Bangladesh has developed and can share with other countries is on cyclone disaster preparedness and developing climate change resilient strategies to deal with the aftermath of cyclones. Bangladesh can continue to develop its expertise in dealing with the loss and damage associated with climate change in post-cyclone recovery and rehabilitation, and adaptation to future climate change impacts.

The third foundation that Bangladesh has already established is the setting up of the Gobeshona network of over 50 universities and research institutions in the country, which has been developing research into action for decision-makers from the national government as well as sectoral and local government, and for NGOs and the general public. The annual Gobeshona conference held every January for the last six years has become a globally recognised event. In fact, the next conference, to be held in January 2021, can be joined with the Proposed Adaptation

Summit event that is now being planned to be held on January 25, 2021.

A fourth advantage that has been established is the Least Developed Countries Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC), which is an official South-South knowledge sharing and capacity building initiative coordinated from the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) in Bangladesh. This can be built upon for the CVF countries.

Finally, Bangladesh has been one of the global leaders on Community Based Adaptation (CBA) over many years and will be hosting the 15th annual International Conference on CBA in June 2021, to be hosted by BRAC. It will be an excellent opportunity for the government to collaborate with BRAC to make this a major global event next year.

All of these foundations that have been laid down by Bangladesh over the years will work in our advantage as the chair of the CVF. The two year tenure as CVF chair will be an opportunity for Bangladesh to establish its leadership on the topic of locally led as well as community based adaptation, and will allow us to share our experiences and knowledge with the other CVF countries.

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