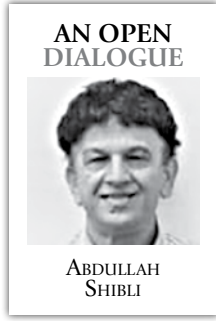# How "facts" influenced Covid policy

A critical review of forecasting models to propagate lockdown

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

At the beginning of this year, policymakers in many countries, including the US and the EU, decided to lock down the entire country in order to save lives and to push back Covid-19. Their calculations were strongly influenced by work done by a few researchers at the Imperial College, London and the University of Chicago. Increasingly, the models and the numbers used to validate the conclusions regarding the wholesale lockdown recommended by these studies are being questioned. The pushback is quite universal.

The title of an oped in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 16 was very clear, "The Data Are In: It's Time for Major Reopening". Even in our neighbouring country, Dr Giridhar R Babu, Professor and Head Lifecourse Epidemiology, Public Health Foundation of India, wrote, "Revised CDC guidelines should prompt India to re-evaluate lockdown, which was more political than epidemiological". He strongly advocates that the new norm for mitigation ought to be a focus on "cluster spread". It is abundantly clear that clusters are a critical point of transmission. Many epidemiologists and economists are now suggesting that instead of promulgating a blanket lockdown, countries must switch to selective measures to identify and mitigate pockets of Covid-19 outbreak as they emerge.

The argument leading to the now-discredited heavy handed lockdown policy was simple and pretty straightforward. It went as follows. If we can save human lives by closing all economic activities, curtailing the movement of humans, and isolating individuals through "social distancing", the benefit measured by the value of each life (know as the value of statistical life or VSL) is in the millions of dollars. Most studies blindly used VSL estimates circulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of the US government, which adjusting for inflation, gives a value of USD 9.5 million today. If the cost to the economy of saving this life is less than USD 9.5 million, then benefits outweigh the cost. How do we know what the cost is? In two research papers that were not peer-reviewed, or more commonly known as "working papers", both published in March 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, it was shown that the cost of saving a life, in terms of lost jobs, income, as well as avoiding hospital and medical costs that accompany morbidity and mortality is a fraction of USD 9.5 million. In other words, the cost-benefit ratio of a lockdown policy is overwhelmingly positive.

The working paper from Michael Greenstone and Vishan Nigam of the University of Chicago's Becker Friedman Institute for Economics purported to show that even moderate social distancing has the potential to save well over a million lives. Their estimates relied heavily on epidemiological models and values of key parameters used by Neil M Ferguson and his team at Imperial College, London.

Greenstone and Nigam estimated that in the USA, an estimated USD 8 trillion in mortality benefits accrue from lockdown and strict social distancing protocols. Their model relies directly on parameter values borrowed from the Imperial College model. "We project that 3-4 months of moderate social distancing beginning in late March 2020 would save 1.7 million lives by October 1. "

It is obvious that many of the strict "worst case" scenario policy prescriptions have failed to generate the benefits but has resulted in damages to economies. Lockdown was imposed without preparations, leading to unbelievable misery for large numbers of people who found themselves without jobs, income, food, or shelter—a situation that many governments seem unwilling to acknowledge. "Further, lockdown should have been used to identify, test and isolate, and treat the most vulnerable—the elderly, those with co-morbid conditions, etc. and this happened only a few countries." Dr Scott Gottlieb, a former US Commissioner of Food and Drugs, was critical of the US lockdown

PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

policy, which he said was based on public fears.

US Federal Reserve Chairman Powell has been candid, so far as mistaken policies adopted in the USA are concerned. "We are not experts on epidemiology, the spread of pandemics or anything like that," Powell said in an online event in late May. "We talk to experts, and the main answer they give you is things are highly uncertain." He said that the Fed did not try to establish its own central system for monitoring or recreating health data, but pulled extensively from the publicly available information, consultations with outside experts, and a massive amount of background reading.

A paper published in the journal *Nature* based on a study done by Global Policy Lab at the University of California, Berkeley shows that the shelter-in-place orders came at an extreme economic cost. In the same issue of *Nature*, researchers from the Imperial College also caution that even as lockdowns start to ease around the world, public health officials still have very limited tools to combat the coronavirus. It is now acknowledged, that the death toll would have been lower if residents of nursing homes had been shielded from infection, something that didn't happen effectively enough.

Other flaws in the Chicago and London models have now been detailed. Ironically, some models in recent weeks are still predicting that by October, there will be more than 200,000 deaths in the USA alone.

A study by Yale economists Barnett-Howell and Mobarak note that "in poor countries, the benefits of lockdowns may be lower (flattening the curve may not help in countries where health systems cannot cope with status quo demand, and the younger demographics in developing countries implies lower mortality rates), while the costs of lockdowns may be higher (interrupting all economic activities while livelihoods depend on day-to-day wages presents a large public health threat of its own)."

In a report on March 31, 2020, in *Science*, a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the modellers' lack of data has come under severe criticism by James Stock of Harvard University. Stock, who served on the federal Council of Economic Advisers under former President Barack Obama, has recommended that researchers focus on the accuracy of parameters, the most critical of which is a better estimate of how deadly the disease is.

"If it turns out a lot of people get infected and have few symptoms, the economically sensible approach might be to let the infection spread and accept that there will be some death toll," Stock says. "The policies are extremely different depending upon these parameters that we don't know."

Finally, some economists have questioned the benefits of strict lockdown and are advocating "smart containment" (SC). The SC policy is based on the infection status of tested individuals. Those tested positive would be subject to stricter isolation than those who have recovered. According to Prof. Alexis Akira Toda, an economist at the University of California, San Diego, the benefits of social distancing could be achieved with less damage to the economy by publicising the level of infection in a given area. All of the economists agree that some policies are more effective if they are calibrated at the local level, with each city or region setting a policy based on the level of infection in that area. Toda, nonetheless, concedes that to avoid needless damage to the economy, the more stringent lockdown could be used when the epidemic is nearing a peak.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. He is Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.
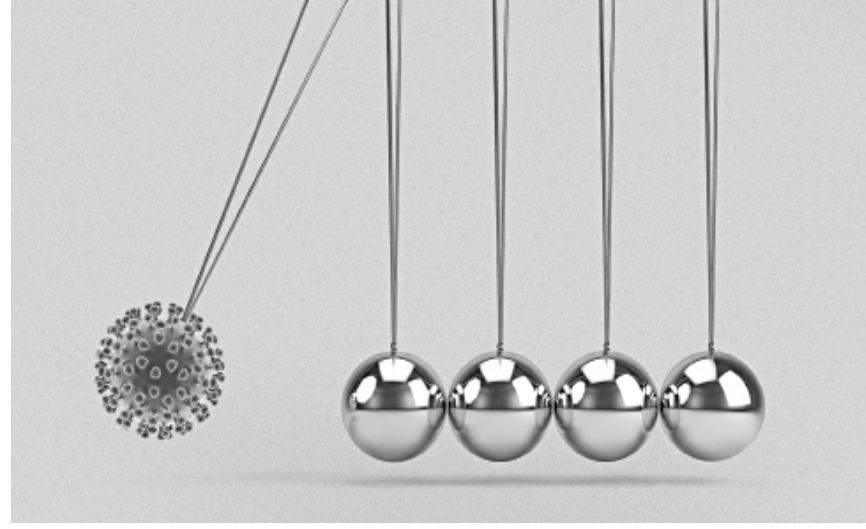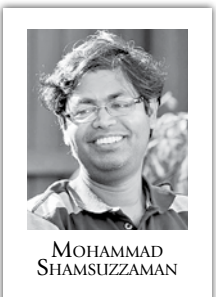

Professor, who do you profess to now?

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

I always wanted to be a professor in English. When the pandemic hit and lockdown began, I ended up being a professor in pandemic. That's not a designation. That's a disaster. I live a few blocks away from the university where I teach, here in Dhaka. I used to walk to and from the university. Since the lockdown, I realised how prophetic James J Novak was when he claimed in *Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water*—"Bangladesh is a small country of long distance." The university seems so far away, now that I never walk in its direction. I hardly relate to such terms as department, discipline and disciples. I still teach, though. I teach outside the box, from and in a box. I teach online. I often wonder whether this is teaching on the line.

The myth that teachers teach the way they were taught has a grain of truth in it. All good teachers are influenced by the great teachers they have had, and when good teachers become great teachers themselves, they're the transformed versions of their influences. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has changed this truism about teaching. Teaching shifted in a jiffy from on-site to online. Some skeptics speculate that teaching online is a turn of the screw, for no teacher was ever taught to teach online. Deep down, some teachers regret that the pandemic has turned them into charlatans, despite solid expertise and experience in teaching. They feel utterly under-prepared to cope with the greatest experiment of teaching in human history—disinterested because of philosophical, ethical and intellectual resistance to teaching online.

I believe that a teacher belongs to a classroom exactly the way a pilot belongs to a cockpit. Because of the pandemic, teachers are misplaced and have lost classrooms. An ideal classroom bristles with ideas and interaction, mentored by a teacher, popularly known as a professor. Given the origin of the word from Greek, *propheteia*, it has something to do with prophesying or clairvoyance. To a professor, the students are pupils, which mean eyeballs in English. A professor is visually impaired without students. Physically he is not, but philosophically he is. The metaphor of students as eyes implies that a professor's vision revolves around students and that students are within the scope of his vision. So, the connection between professors and pupils is not virtual. It's visceral. With online teaching, none of these assumptions hold up. Teaching online is philosophically puzzling.

Teaching online might be ethically iffy, too. Despite the ubiquity of technology, a technological approach to teaching is elitist, not egalitarian. No technology comes to us *gratis*. Technology is a service, and it serves only those who can afford it. When it comes to the purchasing of the gadgets and grids, nations across the world are in a race between Ferraris and bicycles. Why do about 97.10 percent of people in Denmark have access to the internet, whereas only about 1.31 percent of people have access to the internet in Eritrea as of 2020, as the International Telecommunications Union claims? In Bangladesh, about 62.70 percent of people have access to the internet in 2020. Now match this with the information that as of 2018, about 16 percent of people in Bangladesh had smart phone penetration. Teaching online presupposes both access to the internet and smartphones, which in Bangladesh most people don't have. Teaching online renews and reinforces the divide between the haves and the have-nots. Some students who are dislodged by the pandemic to the remotest areas of the country are victims. That gnaws at some teachers, who have to (but don't want to!) teach online.

Besides this philosophical and ethical resistance to teaching online, many teachers find online teaching intellectually insipid. Education is not training, not a skill-specific crash course. Education is ecological. It's a life-long process that strives to prepare humans for an ethical, informed and compassionate engagement with the physical and human environment, where various forces—both natural and artificial—intersect and interact. Education inculcates vision and wisdom to foster peace and prosperity. Education is more about interaction and inspiration than instruction. Formal education transpires in a tight-knit community of teachers and students in a physical space, which evolves from the shade of trees to the warrens of bricks and mortar. Online instruction flips that dynamic of teaching. Consequently, some teachers find online teaching dry, boring and unappealing. According to an Educause survey in 2017, a whopping 91 percent of teachers in the US preferred not to teach online. This finding echoes teachers' sentiments across contexts about online teaching. None of us spent years in grad school to teach online, did we? We have some technical training in technology. We hardly have any pedagogical training involving technology.

We're making do, nonetheless. So, teaching and technology—and in my case, Google—are inseparably embedded. Had I not taught on Google Classroom, I perhaps wouldn't have had a residual gut resistance to teaching online. Back in 2008, I perused the essay, "Is Google Making Us Stupid," by Nicholas Carr in *The Atlantic*. In that essay, Carr amassed an astonishing amount of information to imply that technology is apparently detrimental to knowledge and learning. He acknowledges that the internet is "an incredibly rich store of information" to facilitate research and learning. He confesses as well that the more he stays on the Web, the more he struggles to stay focused, for the internet chips away his "capacity for concentration and contemplation." I was not immediately too sure whether Carr was confessing to the wrong crime or he was blaming the wrong culprit. Around the same time, when I read *Silicon Snake Oil* by Clifford Stoll, I discovered some of Carr's concerns about technology-mediated education confirmed with further evidence and explanations. Technology for education is not altogether a godsend.

Technology has made the whole business of education visual, as if education is all about showing and seeing. But how do we make such attributes as intuition, experience, observation, imagination and sense of judgment—the core pillars of an ideal education—visible? Besides, online pedagogy is a one-size-fits-all approach. Different disciplines approach teaching differently, hands-on training versus lecturing, for example. Different students have different learning styles and aptitudes, too. An ideal pedagogical approach is never preconceived; it's flexible and adaptive. Online teaching is hardly responsive to these nuances of teaching. Perhaps the biggest concern about online education is that it feeds the perception that education is easy and instant and that teachers can teach whether students are engaged or not. Education has always been difficult and time-consuming. As Oscar Wilde in his essay *The Critic as an Artist* claims, "Nothing worth knowing can be taught." As teachers, we can't teach, per se; what we do and what we can do is to create an environment where learning can take place. By mere teaching, we can't create that environment. Gesture, proximity, distance, eye contact, facial expression and vocal intonation critically participate in creating that environment. These properties of teaching are missing altogether in online teaching.

Despite these shortcomings of online teaching, I would like to continue teaching online for some time. It's a fortunate accident to re-imagine teaching for a more powerful and enduring education. Online education turns us again into what we have been for centuries, *guru*. The word *guru* combines two Arabic words: *guah* (power) and *ruah* (soul). A *guru* empowers the souls of his students by shifting the focus of education from physical to metaphysical as well as from body to soul. Now that we're distanced from our students and are only virtually connected, we need to reinvent ourselves to engage and empower our students. We can't see them to provide them with a vision; we can't touch them to transform them; and we can't reach them to teach them. Teachers are transcendent. If they are not, they are imposters. And the system that sustains them is flawed. It needs overhauling, so online teaching gains ground as a potential option.
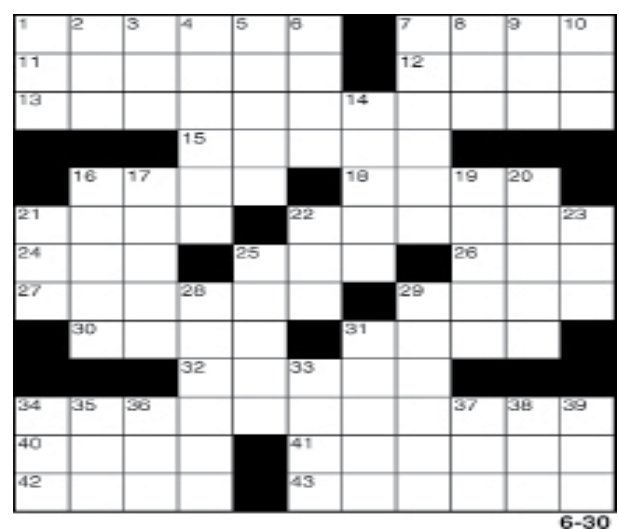
However promising that option is, it dislodges classroom and teachers-students interaction. As such, some skeptics might ask, "Professor, who do you profess to now?" When asked this, we should stay silent like a saint. We don't know whether we still need to define teaching and learning beyond such terms as teachers and students. They no longer are who they were!

Mohammad Shamsuzzaman is an Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University, Bangladesh.

> *Despite the ubiquity of technology, a technological approach to teaching is elitist, not egalitarian. No technology comes to us gratis. Technology is a service, and it serves only those who can afford it. When it comes to the purchasing of the gadgets and grids, nations across the world are in a race between Ferraris and bicycles. Why do about 97.10 percent of people in Denmark have access to the internet, whereas only about 1.31 percent of people have access to the internet in Eritrea as of 2020, as the International Telecommunications Union claims?*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Halts
7 Movie
11 Bearlike
12 Open space
13 Give credence to
15 "Wake up, Little –"
16 Speck
18 Oatmeal problem
21 Cocoon stage
22 Head out
24 "Roses – red"
25 Melancholy
26 Coffee, in slang
27 Uncommon thing
29 Hamlet
30 Turner of film
31 Melodies
33 Chimney output
34 Get satisfaction from
40 Sweeping story
41 Rodeo horse
42 Easter lead-in
43 Smoothed, in a way

DOWN
1 Edit out
2 Pitching stat
3 Inquire
4 Afternoon break
5 Follow as a result
6 Collections
7 One way to deal
8 Tick off
9 Maui souvenir
10 Fellow
14 Lubricated
16 Wall art
17 Sung drama
19 College study
20 Ship fronts
21 Golf goal
22 Week part
23 Toe count
25 Mailing need
28 Fly or flea
29 Attached, in a way
31 Director Kurosawa
33 Spheres
34 – Aviv
35 Clumsy galoot
36 Relatives
37 Wrap up
38 Bar rocks
39 Silent assent

6-30

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S N A C K   F A C T S
I O W A N   O P E R A
C R E P E   S E D A N
    T E A S   E Y E
A R T I S T I C
N E R O   E L A T E D
T A I N T   S U E D E
E L M E R S   T E N N
  D O A S I S A Y
L A B   O N T O
I C E U P   O N S E T
E R A S E   L E A V E
D E T E R   E D G E D