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Ensure delivery of kits to testing centres

Govt must cut through red tape to deal with the pandemic effectively

THE number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Bangladesh has reached over 1.7 lakh. Now is the time to ramp up tests to measure the spread of Covid-19 and identify hotspots in order to contain the virus. However, the rate of testing has significantly dropped recently—on July 2, 18,362 tests were conducted across the country, but now the daily number of tests has dropped to under 15,000. This has been attributed to a shortage of testing kits, especially in Dhaka, Gazipur and Narayanganj, where some centres have been forced to reduce or even suspend testing. Recently, the government took the decision of introducing a fee for testing—according to a government circular, “many people took advantage of it (tests) without even having any symptom.”

In this context, it is unacceptable that more than five lakh Covid-19 testing kits have been lying in the warehouses of several companies in the capital for the last couple of months. According to a report in this daily, a number of suppliers have alleged that the Central Medical Store Depot (CMSD), which is responsible for public purchase and distribution of medical equipment, is delaying the approval and delivery of kits. These allegations include the delay of sampling procedures for over a month, although the process is not meant to take more than a day; the cancellation of orders for kits after they have already been imported; and refusal to receive kits even after issuing work orders for them.

What is even more disappointing than this dragging of feet is the statements given by top government officials regarding these baffling delays. The directors of CMSD and the DGHS have both declined to comment, and a spokesperson for the DGHS claimed that there is no testing kit crisis in the country and that 1.88 lakh kits are now at their disposal. If this is the case, why has the number of daily tests been reduced, and why are fees being charged for this abundance of testing kits? If more kits are not needed, why are companies being given work orders, only to have them delayed or even cancelled?

We are in the middle of the worst public health crisis this country has ever seen. Now is not the time to pass on the blame or cover up realities. The WHO has made it very clear that robust testing is one of the main tools for understanding the spread of the pandemic and coming up with relevant policies. We urge the government to immediately cut through this red tape and ensure that imported testing kits reach hospitals and testing centres without further delays.

A welcome move to reach the hungry before Eid

Govt should also not forget the newly poor

WE appreciate the government’s initiative to distribute free rice to the extreme poor people ahead of Eid-ul-Azha. The food aid will be given to one crore VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) cardholders across the country to mitigate their sufferings due to flood and coronavirus outbreak. Under the initiative, each person will get 10 kilogrammes of rice for free. While we commend this initiative for the extreme poor and destitute people, we must remind the authorities that they should also provide food assistance to the people who have become newly poor due to the pandemic.

The number of poor people in the urban areas has increased by a large proportion in the last few months as many rickshaw and rickshaw-van pullers, transport and construction workers, street hawkers, day labourers, garment workers and domestic help lost their livelihoods. These people also need the government’s food assistance before Eid.

It is good to learn that the government has set some 12 criteria of which at least four will have to be fulfilled by a person to be eligible for receiving the assistance. The criteria include landless households or those who have only homesteads; households dependent on daily wage labour; households dependent on women’s income or begging; households headed by widowed, divorced or separated women, etc. The disaster management and relief ministry’s directive to redistribute the VGF cards in unions and wards based on the 2011 census is also very important since many cardholders may have died by this time, while many others may not be eligible for the assistance anymore.

We hope that this time there will be no corruption in the process of providing food assistance to these vulnerable people. We have seen in the recent past how the government’s efforts to provide relief to the pandemic-affected people were marred by corruption as some members of the ruling party as well as local public representatives misappropriated relief materials meant for the poor. Anomalies in the database of people eligible for the government’s assistance were also reported in the media when the government went for distributing cash incentives to the extreme poor in May, before Eid-ul-Fitr.

We hope this time any corruption in making the list and also in relief distribution will be checked through proper monitoring. And as we have mentioned earlier, the government should also provide food assistance to the urban slum dwellers, who have slipped into poverty due to the pandemic.

SHAMIM AHMED, GIAS U AHSAN, SHARMIN MAJUMDER, and SALMA HASAN

COVID-19, caused by the novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2, has led to a pandemic that is increasing the burden of mortality and morbidities throughout the world. It has brought many challenges including prevalence of disability and caused major disruption to healthcare services. About 12 million people around the globe have been infected by the virus so far, with a vast majority of them already recovered. However, half a million valuable lives have been lost due to this deadly disease. In addition, the virus may have a lasting effect on the body in general—as well as in major organs including lungs—for those who have survived the infection.

In the aftermath of a major disease outbreak, many patients require rehabilitation to help them get back to a normal life or adapt to living with disability. Patients who have required intensive care for more than a few days often have wider physical, cognitive and mental health support needs following their discharge from acute settings. As Covid-19 is a multi-system disease, we are increasingly recognising more subtle deficits in patients who are less severely affected, even in those who did not require hospital admission.

Although we are still at the early stage of tracking the long-term health effects of the coronavirus on recovered individuals, the virus seems to be exerting damage even beyond the respiratory system. Some survivors have reported having shortness

The most common physical challenge for recovered Covid-19 patients is shortness of breath. It means simple physical activities like walking or climbing stairs can become challenging for them, especially for those who are old. People have to be patient at this point.

of breath, unusual fatigue and body aches months after the initial infection. Studies conducted in Asia also reported that some recovered patients had signs of impaired function of their lungs, heart and blood vessels, liver, kidneys, and intestines. In addition to the persisting effects of the virus, patients hospitalised with severe Covid-19 are likely to have to deal with a wide range of physical, cognitive, and mental health problems as a consequence of spending long

prioritising sleep and regulating energy, staying active, and eating micronutrient-rich diet would be helpful to fight with the post-Covid-19 exhaustion. Seeing a respiratory physiotherapist about how to exercise can also be helpful, if needed.

Most patients who survived on a ventilator are prone to having muscle weakness. Thus, regular movement of limbs, sit-ups, standing or walking with help might be needed to reduce that weakness. Some survivors might need to

factor for everyone to boosting the immune system. In addition, since food and immune system are inextricably connected, consumption of vitamin C and vitamin D, nutrients such as iron, zinc, and selenium would be helpful to maintain a well-functioning immune system. Food containing probiotics, such as yogurt, is also recommended to add healthy bacteria in the gut environment and aid proper absorption of nutrients.

It’s also important to remember that



The coronavirus seems to be exerting damage even beyond the patient’s respiratory system.

PHOTO: REUTERS/GIORGOS MOUTAFIS

time in the ICU, receiving emergency treatment as well as critical care support for survival. These conditions are supposed to be further complicated as body’s immune system gets compromised through battling off the infection.

The most common physical challenge for recovered Covid-19 patients is shortness of breath. It means simple physical activities like walking or climbing stairs can become challenging for them, especially for those who are old. People have to be patient at this point, because it might take a long time to get past this symptom with or without medication, depending on the severity of the condition. They are also likely to be affected by the post-viral fatigue syndrome which is the next most common residual manifestation among the recovered people. Proper rest such as

follow a basic exercise programme with the consultation of physiotherapists. Post Intensive Care Syndrome (PICS) was prevalent among many survivors who reported problems with thinking and judgment, concentration challenges, delirium or memory deficit. It is important to make sure that these survivors do not go through any kind of social stigma or discrimination and that they receive continuous support from their friends and family. Social and behavioural health scientists can help deal with cognitive dysfunction at a mass level.

Taking steps to boost immunity is absolutely necessary for patients who have already been affected by Covid-19 as well as for those who have not reflected any visible symptoms. Adequate and sound sleep is the single most important

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Building Forward with Digital Agriculture

MICHAEL KREMER and GILBERT F. HOUNGBO

THE Covid-19 pandemic is reshaping societies around the world, in part by accelerating the digital revolution that was already underway at the beginning of the year. Since then, corporations have instituted mass teleworking. International gatherings now take place online, with heads of state and industry participating from home. Students learn remotely, and digital payments are further edging out cash.

But with technology influencing our lives more than ever, there is a risk that it will spread unevenly, entrenching existing inequalities and leaving the world’s poorest people further behind. That is not inevitable. Digital technologies can help end global poverty and hunger faster, including in rural parts of developing countries, where the majority of people earn their living from agriculture.

Digital agriculture—whereby farmers use mobile phones and other digital technologies to access customised, actionable agricultural information in real time—could revolutionise how these communities secure and improve their livelihoods. By making the right investments today, while many agricultural extension officers are restricted from visiting farmers in person, we can kick-start digital adoption and start to close the income gap that has long held rural areas back.

It should go without saying that family farmers need timely, accurate information as much as any small enterprise does. That is why governments in developed and developing countries have for decades supported farmers with public information campaigns. The world’s longest-running radio drama, *The Archers*, was created in the 1950s to help farmers increase agricultural productivity following the rationing and food shortages during World War II.

Today, most farmers in the world’s remotest places have mobile phones, and thus are equipped to receive targeted agricultural advice through simple text or voice messages, even without access to the Internet. For example, in Odisha, India, Precision Agriculture

for Development delivers customised, crop-specific, free agricultural advice to almost 800,000 farmers through their phones.

There is extensive, rigorous evidence that such advisories—delivered at scale and at low cost—can change farmers’ practices for the better. There is also growing evidence to show that farmers

digital technologies offer a host of other opportunities for poor, rural communities. With support from the United Nations International Fund for Agriculture Development, remote sensors have been deployed to help farmers optimise water and fertiliser levels for their crops, and drones are being used to identify plants in poor



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PHOTO: REUTERS

who are empowered with digital information will increase their yields, incomes, and resilience against shocks. A recent paper co-authored by one of us (Kremer) in *Science* demonstrates that farmers who received digitally delivered recommendations were 22 percent more likely to adopt the recommended agrochemical inputs, yielding USD 10 in benefits for every USD 1 spent.

Moreover, while farmers rely on mobile phones to receive market information, access bank accounts, and monitor weather forecasts,

health so that remedial action can be taken.

Innovations in digital agriculture also can help farmers increase their yields and incomes by adopting locally suited seeds and fertiliser, protecting crops from diseases and pests (such as fall armyworm or locusts), adapting to climate change, selling at the best possible price, and accessing financial services. All of these applications can expand farmers’ opportunities and reduce their risks.

In fact, digitisation has the potential

to transform the agricultural sector in developing countries. But doing so will require further innovation and strong partnerships between governments, businesses, and farmers, as well as a regulatory environment to ensure that technology remains affordable and accessible.

The private sector should be encouraged to advance, adopt, and re-engineer technologies for, and in collaboration with, small-scale farmers. Investing in digital agriculture today offers the promise of a quadruple return.

For starters, digitisation can help many of the world’s poorest people weather the Covid-19 crisis, by giving them remote access to advice, inputs, and markets. Moreover, it can increase the overall food supply and boost food security through higher yields. Third, it can accelerate the adoption of a proven, cost-effective, scalable strategy for increasing long-term farm production and improving the livelihoods of poor, rural people. And, finally, it can give farmers a voice, enabling governments to direct and measure the impact of agricultural investments.

But digital technology is not a panacea. While farmers increasingly are equipped with mobile phones, they also need advice that is tailored to their needs, as well as access to agricultural inputs (fertilisers and seeds) and markets to sell their products.

With the coronavirus pandemic still running its course, now is the time to think about not just building back, but building forward. By accelerating investment and innovation in digital agriculture, we can protect the world’s poorest people from some of the worst effects of the current crisis. When we all emerge from lockdown, one hopes that we will have already laid the foundation for building a fairer, more prosperous, and sustainable future.

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