

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 27, 2020, BHADRA 12, 1427 BS

Explore all options to access Covid-19 vaccine

We must not allow response fatigue and apathy to delay these efforts

ON Wednesday, Bangladesh crossed the three lakh mark of known coronavirus infections in the country, bringing the total number of cases to 3,02,147, with over 4,000 deaths. A constant positivity rate of around 20 percent shows how far-reaching the spread of the disease still is, and that the pandemic is far from over for us. In this scenario, we need to do everything within our means to stop community transmission of Covid-19 and ensure that response fatigue does not set in.

While urgent and immediate steps to contain coronavirus now are of the utmost importance, we also need to be making preparations for the future. Although Bangladesh is currently the 15th worst affected country in the world, less than one percent of its population has been infected, according to IEDCR data—whereas, to achieve herd immunity, a country would require at least 70 percent of the population to be infected. In this scenario, it is obvious that Bangladesh is in dire need of a vaccine as soon as it is available if we are to get coronavirus under control.

However, according to experts, we have made little progress with regard to procuring a potential vaccine. So far, the only step that has been taken by the government is a submission of an expression of interest as a member of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations (GAVI). This is despite an offer from the Chinese organisation Sinovac, one of over 203 research organisations working to develop a vaccine, to include Bangladesh in its phase-III trials. While there have been mentions of collaborating with India regarding trials, no further steps have been taken in this regard either.

We have already seen enough delay, apathy and mismanagement in our response to containing the spread of coronavirus in Bangladesh. The government must ensure that such lethargic responses do not cripple our attempts to procure a much-needed vaccine as well. We urge the government to explore all possible avenues, whether it is applying through the COVAX facility mechanism to get vaccines from WHO and the GAVI, or entering into bilateral negotiations with vaccine-inventing companies or governments to negotiate ease of access. In all of these scenarios, we must be guided by expert opinions and not political concerns.

A city hospital's illegal practices uncovered

What about other big hospitals?

THAT a well-known health facility like Dr Sirajul Islam Medical College Hospital in the capital's Mouchak area would do three tests on one petri dish and use expired reagents and accessories in the operation theatre, intensive care unit (ICU), and even in the Covid-19 isolation unit, is outrageous. These anomalies have been discovered in a recent mobile court drive conducted by a Rab executive magistrate's team. The mobile court has also found that the hospital's isolation unit was not maintaining complete isolation, thereby risking infecting other patients with coronavirus.

If expired surgical accessories are used in an operation theatre, patients' lives are put at risk as they might develop various infections. And putting three blood samples in a single petri dish for every test means that patients will not get correct blood test results. These are very basic things that a hospital ought to maintain. The question is, how did the hospital manage to continue with these illegal practices for so long?

The medical malpractices discovered in this hospital also make us wonder about the situation in other reputed hospitals in the city and elsewhere. Only last month, a mobile court drive in the city's Regent Hospital found that the hospital authorities issued fake Covid-19 certificates and charged patients for test and treatment, violating an agreement with the government. There must be many other hospitals and clinics that are also violating rules in the absence of any overseeing mechanism.

Although we appreciate the random mobile court drives which often expose many harmful, illegal practices by the hospitals, we would like to see concrete measures from the health ministry to ensure that hospitals and test labs abide by the standard rules of operation. There must be a systematic monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that medical facilities are following rules and procedures before and after their licenses are renewed.

In this particular case, the hospital authorities should be held accountable for the medical malpractices going on there and for compromising patients' safety. Only fining them is not enough—they should be punished according to the law.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Crowded buses will pose great health risks

Before the resumption of public transport following lockdown, the government had hiked bus fares by 60 percent on the condition that the vehicles would carry half the passengers of their seating capacity. It's upsetting that the authorities are now considering resuming the bus service at full swing, meaning the entire bus will be packed. This will mean an end to social distancing which is so essential to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

The high prices of tickets, along with the "assumption" that everything will be under control, will actually increase the risks. Already, we are struggling to cope with the pandemic as infection and death rates continue to rise. If the government does not intervene immediately to take appropriate steps, more people will fall victim to the virus.

Amin Hossain, Dhaka

We must save the press before coronavirus sinks it

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

IN April, British journalist and author Susie Boniface, in an article for Mirror Online, asked her readers to take a moment to imagine a world in which there is no journalism. It's a lawless, clueless world, she posits, with no knowledge, no scrutiny, and no democracy or the thousand other things that it precipitates. If the pandemic has taught us anything—besides the priceless value of universal healthcare or the worth of genome-mapping, vaccines and science—it is that journalists, whether you like them or not, play an essential part in your life.

"We're not perfect. We're not your favourite people. We never demand your thanks; we just want you to hear yourselves think," writes Boniface.

This statement remains a thumping endorsement of the profession of journalists. Unfortunately, being essential doesn't make them impervious to shocks like Covid-19. The pandemic, like in other countries, is also stress-testing the strengths and frailties of the press in Bangladesh, with devastating consequences. We get a picture of the situation from a statement issued on August 21 by the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (Noab). The newspaper industry, it says, is "nearly on the verge of collapse", thanks to drastic circulation declines (accounting for a loss of two-thirds of pre-pandemic sales figures) and plummeting advertising revenues. The sharp fall in revenues has led to many newspapers closing down or discontinuing print publication and shifting online, mass layoffs, reduction in regular payments, etc. Even multiple cost-cutting techniques employed by the newspapers—such as reducing the number of pages, volume of printing, coloured pages, as well as cutting down on other administrative expenses—couldn't offset the damage.

According to a July 3 report by Prothom Alo, citing data from the Department of Films and Publications of the government, until June, a total of 254 newspapers in Dhaka and eight divisional cities were forced to close down because of Covid-19. As we near the end of August, with the pandemic still showing no signs of letting up, this number is likely to have increased. The abrupt closures coincided with a spike in incidents of harassment using different intimidation tactics and legal instruments including the Digital Security Act. "There is no safeguard for newspapers and journalists," declares a statement by the Editors' Council released on August 24.

These are merely conclusions drawn by the industry leaders and observers, however, not the sum total of the experience of individual journalists. Once you put faces on the stories of sufferings caused by the triple whammy of closures,

retrenchments and harassment, you begin to see how uncertain the life of a journalist is in Bangladesh, and how quickly the ground beneath the press—the serious press—is shifting.

Unfortunately, despite their essential services in these extraordinary times, the journalist community remains cut off from the protection they deserve. While they fight to ensure that struggling industries have access to the incentives and stimulus packages announced by the government, their own need for similar industrial concessions remains unaccounted for. While they go to great lengths to report from the field and provide credible, life-saving information—often putting themselves in the path of the virus—their own lives and livelihoods remain precarious. While they continue to give voices to the voiceless, their own stories remain untold. It's not just a cruel irony

(AIT) on raw materials from five percent to zero percent—also demand careful consideration. Even risk allowance and health insurance for the journalists should not be ruled out. We have seen how the West Bengal government extended health insurance coverage of up to 10 lakh rupees for frontline Covid-19 workers, including journalists.

It suits some politicians to question the need for such concessions and cash injections. But the truth is, journalism is an essential public good. If the press suffers, so does democracy, so does the performance of a government and that of public institutions, so do the people who depend on it to highlight issues vital to their life. This has been the case as far back as we can remember.

But the extraordinary nature of the present crisis is also proof that government support or lack thereof is not the only



File photo of people reading newspapers on the streets in Dhaka, on December 31, 2018.

PHOTO: AFP/INDRANIL MUKHERJEE

of fate. It's the cumulative result of years of neglect, hostility and lack of vision suffered by the press.

Noab has made a number of valid demands to the government to offset the impacts of the coronavirus. Foremost among them is the reduction of taxes: as a service industry, newspapers are void of any special benefits and have to pay a corporate tax of 35 percent whereas, despite being a for-profit sector, the RMG industry's corporate tax stands at 10 to 12 percent. Noab has urged the government to reduce the tax for newspapers to 10 percent.

It also demanded omitting the 15 percent VAT on the import of newsprint. Under the Value Added Tax and Supplementary Duty Act, newspapers fall under the list of services that are exempt from VAT, yet they have to pay it. Other demands—such as reducing the Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) on advertising revenues from four percent to two percent and reducing the advance income tax

issue for the press. The plight of the journalists being sacked or furloughed is a concern for all of us, but it's important to understand that darker days may be ahead unless we learn to grow out of our shells. Covid-19 may have caused the "biggest existential crisis" in the history of the press, but the crux of it has long been in the making.

To put it succinctly, the industry has been dogged by a lack of innovative business models as well as quality content for long. Today, advertisements pay for the journalism as we know it—at least, all the journalism that isn't the BSS. The irony of this fact is inescapable: how can an industry expect to be sustainable when its main source of income is not its consumers or audiences, but the advertisers, mostly corporate houses using column space to promote their brands? When the advertisers are in trouble, those who depend on them are bound to be in trouble too. This is why our newspapers, despite record levels of traffic and

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Why all countries should contribute to ending global poverty



ANDY SUMNER

TRILLIONS of dollars have already been spent on the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and no one knows what the final bill will be. Is it possible to respond to a much longer crisis—global poverty—with even a fraction of these resources?

Richer countries are currently committed to spending 0.7 percent of their gross national income (GNI) on international development aid. This target was established by the Pearson Commission in 1969, and approved in a United Nations General Assembly resolution the following year. Countries reached this agreement a half-century ago in a world in which global poverty was at very high levels. At the time, the world was justifiably perceived in binary terms: the North was wealthy, and the South was poor.

Much has changed in the intervening 50 years. Some countries have met the 0.7 percent target, but many others have yet to do so. Many developing countries experienced rapid economic growth in the 2000s—not only China and India, but also a number of African countries. Although all gains are currently in jeopardy, prior to the pandemic, at least, the world had entered a new era, with fewer low-income countries. At the same time, the higher global ambitions set out in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) committed countries to end poverty in all its forms by 2030.

A new era needs a new approach. The Covid-19 pandemic makes this need even more urgent. My colleagues and I propose a scaled financial commitment to development, with a twist: it should be universal across all countries, rich and

poor. Before describing the proposal, it is necessary to ask what has changed since the 0.7-percent-of-GNI target was adopted. During this period, two "new middles" emerged. The first is an increase in the number of middle-income countries—now home to much of the developing world's population. In many of these countries, aid levels are already low relative to domestic resources and non-public international flows. At the other end of the spectrum, about 30 countries remain "stuck" in terms of growth. These highly aid-dependent states are home to approximately 10 percent of the population of developing countries—not

when measured at the World Bank's poverty thresholds of USD 3.20 and USD 5.50 per day. It is sobering to note that every 10 cents added to the poverty line increases the global headcount of the poor by 100 million. Moreover, the poverty count at USD 1.90 doubles when one considers multidimensional poverty, which includes health, education, and nutrition.

When using a threshold that is associated with a permanent escape from the risk of future poverty—USD 13 per day in 2011 purchasing-power-parity terms—some 80 percent of the population in developing countries remains poor. Furthermore, poverty does not only occur

A new era needs a new approach. The Covid-19 pandemic makes this need even more urgent. My colleagues and I propose a scaled financial commitment to development, with a twist: it should be universal across all countries, rich and poor.

a "bottom billion," but a bottom half-billion.

The other "new middle" comprises those who have escaped poverty, but remain vulnerable to falling back into it. This group, as we show, represents more than two-thirds of the developing world's people.

If measured using the World Bank's definition of extreme poverty—living on USD 1.90 or less per day—global poverty has fallen (although the decline is more modest when China is excluded), and income has grown among many of the world's poorest. Extreme poverty now affects only some 10 percent of the population in developing countries, down from around 50 percent 40 years ago. But poverty remains at startling levels

in Sub-Saharan Africa and in fragile or conflict-affected states. It is widespread. In short, the second "new middle" are those in developing countries living above the USD 1.90 poverty line, but below the USD 13 vulnerability-to-future-poverty threshold.

Against this backdrop, and amid the global pandemic, our proposal calls for a "universal development commitment" (UDC) from all countries—rich and poor alike. Given their aim of poverty eradication, the SDGs would inevitably be the core focus of any such UDC.

One option for a UDC would be to institute a sliding scale. For example, high-income countries could keep the commitment at 0.7 percent of GNI, while upper middle-income countries would

Journalism is an essential public good. If the press suffers, so does democracy, so does the performance of a government and that of public institutions, so do the people who depend on it to highlight issues vital to their life.

engagement from online readers during the pandemic, are struggling to survive.

The pandemic has served up a lesson for the industry that to cushion such external shocks, self-sustain and even grow in the future, it has to find a way to shift its dependence from the advertisers to the consumers, who will be its main source of revenue. One way to do that, experts say, is through expanding the consumer-based business model. For example, *The New York Times*, despite having its fair share of crises created by Covid-19, has seen unprecedented success in this regard. As of the first week of May, the number of its digital subscribers increased to 6 million. Many other news organisations in the US, the UK and other countries have also seen a boost in digital subscriptions. While the key to success in a digital ecosystem is still a mystery to most of us and the income from digital subscriptions (and advertisements) is still very low compared to the revenues needed, there is growing consensus that utilising the customer-based revenue model properly may toss a liferaft to the ships being torpedoed by Covid-19.

For this business model to work, you need to monetise your content—not just the space or platform you provide. You need to provide quality content, both written and visual, something that readers and viewers would be willing to pay for. This is where the present crisis offers us an opportunity to transition to better journalism, and maybe come out stronger in the end.

But if journalism is to be saved as an essential public good right now, a lot more needs to be done—not just by the newspaper industry itself, but also by the government with public money and proper policy support as well as the global technology companies like Facebook and Google whose disruptive influences continue to afflict the newspapers. Nothing short of a concerted effort by all will be enough to ride out this crisis.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

contribute 0.35 percent. Lower-middle-income countries would earmark 0.2 percent of their GNI, with lower-income countries contributing just 0.1 percent. These are gross contributions, not net. In this scenario, the total finance available for development would amount to almost USD 500 billion per year.

These additional resources could, in principle, lift the remaining approximately 750 million people out of USD 1.90-per-day poverty; end hunger and malnutrition for an estimated 1.5 billion people; end preventable child mortality; make primary and secondary schooling possible for all children; and provide access to safe and affordable drinking water for over one billion people, as well as providing adequate sanitation for more than two billion people. And in this scaled-contribution scenario, USD 200 billion would still remain available to support the achievement of other SDGs.

Developing countries would gain by contributing, because a universal development commitment would lead to more resources for those countries overall. Moreover, and equally important, contributing would ensure that poorer countries have a voice in funds' governance, whether symbolically, as a sign of their moral right to be heard, or physically, as members of the board deciding on priorities and policies.

There are undoubtedly numerous other questions our proposal raises. But the principle remains simple: Every country pays into the system, and the money is spent on ending global poverty. Amid a global pandemic, and with the SDG deadline a decade away, the world needs a universal development commitment sooner rather than later.

Andy Sumner is Professor of International Development at King's College London and a non-resident senior research fellow at UNU-WIDER. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2020. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)