

Can Covid-19 become a catalyst for nutritional self-reliance?



FIRDOUSI NAHER

EVER since the threat of Covid-19 first hit us, there has been a spike in online sales of both food and non-food items. For food in particular, it is difficult not to succumb to the alluring pictures of goodies posted on social media. In fact, for many of us, food consumption has actually increased, given the exposure to a wide choice, ranging from everyday foods to high-value ones, coupled with the ease of doorstep delivery. Covid-19 or not, many of us are largely unaffected in terms of having nutrient-rich diverse food on our plates. But let us ponder a bit on where all these foods originate from: the farmers.

Going by the regular media reports on hardships faced by farmers, particularly those producing highly perishable items, we know that they are having a hard time during this pandemic. It is heart-breaking to see gallons and gallons of milk being dumped, or the dejected look on the faces of vegetable producers, because of the rock-bottom prices, or the trail of forlorn cattle farmers waiting expectantly for a buyer. These are the people who toil to get food on our plates and yet they are the ones who have little on theirs.

While I come back to our farmers in a bit, let me dwell on the modern-day integrated food system that ensures the movement of food across the globe, the fruits of which we enjoy in our daily life. However, the robustness and sustainability of a system gets proven in times of adversity. Can we afford to unconditionally depend on the global food system to supply us with adequate food as and when we need it? Border closures, restrictions on travel and imports, and the necessity of quarantines in the current situation have exposed us to the uncertainties of disruptions in the supply chain. Even before the pandemic, we were being bombarded with the news of spiralling prices of onion, the near-essential item in Bangladeshi cuisine, following a crisis in the market.

Our hard-earned rice self-sufficiency is undoubtedly a remarkable feat for a nation that began its journey with literally nothing except its teeming millions. Our focus should now be on moving forward from here towards becoming nutritionally self-sufficient. The

limited purchasing power of the masses has placed Bangladesh amongst those countries with the lowest per capita consumption of milk, meat, eggs, fruits and vegetables, not only globally but also within the South Asian region. Although recent trends of falling per capita rice consumption are encouraging since that implies a diversification of diets, we cannot become complacent and allow things to take their own course. Rather, we have to build on this development and aggressively focus on diversifying and intensifying our food production and consumption. Only then can we call ourselves "food secure" in the true sense of the term. This is where our farmers come in.

It is hard to find a farmer in Bangladesh who does not grow paddy and, that too, for most of the year. It is the lifeline of the farming community (and also for the rest of the population!). Based on the latest figures (2018) from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, our rice production exceeds our domestic rice demand by more than 14 million tons. This is a stupendous quantity of excess rice, given that there are stocks in our silos too. Moreover, we do not export any significant quantity of rice. A quick calculation will reveal that this huge quantity of excess rice takes up more than 4.5 million hectares of agricultural land! This is not the optimal use of land resources in a country that is severely land-crunched. If this land could be devoted to other agricultural production activities, it would be a boon for our food sector.

A lot of work has gone into making Bangladesh the bountiful granary that it is today and understandably so, given the haunting memories of famine and starvation and the constraints faced by the government to import food, soon after independence. The combination of political determination, advances in research and the toil of the farmers have made it a reality. But the rice-centric efforts have relegated other high-value, nutrient-dense food crops to the background. While rice will, for obvious reasons, continue to be the prime agricultural produce of the country, the focus needs to shift to increasing cereal productivity rather than coming up with newer varieties of rice. We already have more than 100 rice varieties at present. So there is an urgent need to review the current mandate of the agricultural research organisations to meet emerging needs with a focus on diversification out of primary staples. For instance, research aimed at introducing stress-tolerant, high-

yielding varieties of pulses (often called the "poor man's protein") can substantially contribute to reducing Bangladesh's dependence on imported pulses.

Given that rice is a traditionally grown crop as well as one with a high shelf-life, growing rice has become the farmers' comfort zone. The risk-averse farmers are reluctant to try out new crops. If they are to be convinced to diversify their output, they have to, first and foremost, have the assurance that they will get

affecting the local dairy industry.

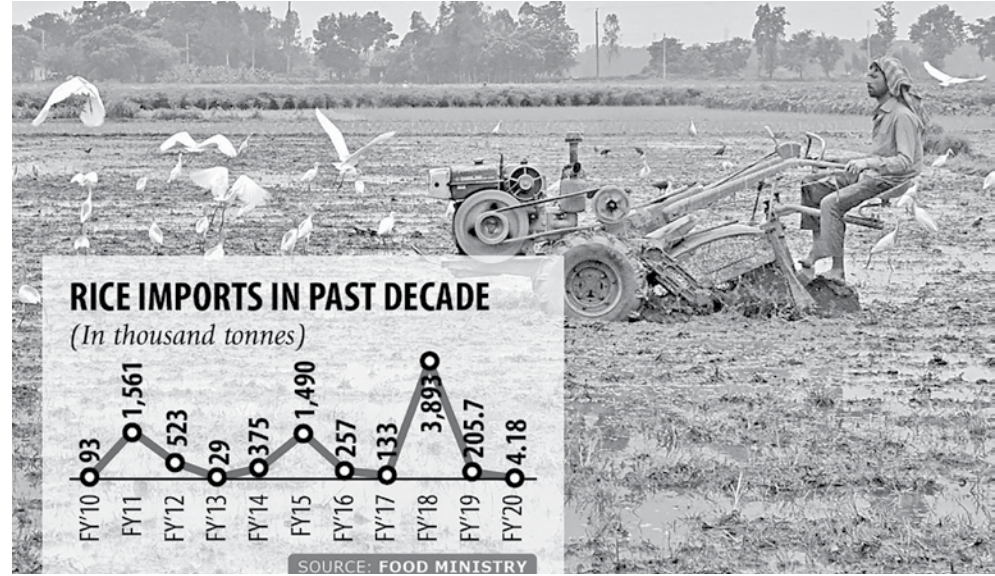
We do not know when the pandemic situation will cease and things will return to normalcy, but we must be prepared for any exigencies in the future. Compared to many countries, Bangladesh has done relatively well in the current Covid-19 situation but there is no guarantee that we will be able to pull through just as well, should another contingency strike us. For a net food-importing country such as ours, the possibility

what the external conditions are. Indeed, this is not to say that we stop all food imports, because ending trade is not a desirable or likely outcome for policy. What we need to aim for is nutritional self-reliance as well as striking a balance between the rural producers and the urban consumers through appropriate trade policies.

A holistic approach is key, starting from detailed planning to effective and sustained execution. Such an approach should encompass the entire gamut of production activities. These include national estimates of nutritional requirement, area mapping to cater to these estimates based on the agro-ecological suitability of each area, and comprehensive farmer support to incentivise the required production. Such support should also include reliable agriculture extension services. Off-field, there must be a robust market monitoring and information system which would be reflected in the prices. Ensuring safe produce should also be a part of this system that will generate consumer confidence in locally produced products. This is very important since the consumer confidence—particularly with regard to highly perishable commodities like milk—is rather low and is driving many to opt for foreign brands. There is a dire need to deal with the agriculture sector in a sensitive way, minimising the often unscrupulous activities of middlemen and other actors. Finally, adequate investments, including on storage and transportation infrastructure, must be made to strengthen the supply chain that will link the farmers to the food that ultimately reaches our homes. An integral part of this strategy must also be a contingency plan in the face of natural calamities that may adversely affect agricultural production.

This, undoubtedly, is a lot of work and requires determination and dedication to pull through. But this is also something that we must do, given the far-reaching effect of the food sector on the rest of the economy. Once we are able to set up a self-sustaining system, we can focus our energies on other aspects instead of struggling to ensure food for all. Who knew that Covid-19 would come and create such havoc? One thing that is certain is change—big or small. And the current pandemic is one such big change. We must be prepared for such unforeseen changes.

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Given that rice is a traditionally grown crop as well as one with a high shelf-life, growing rice has become the comfort zone for our risk-averse farmers, to the detriment of the wider food industry.

PHOTO: STAR

a proper price for their produce. No rational being will expend their time, energy and resources on something that brings them no return at all. But instances of cheap imports flooding the market have seriously hampered the livelihoods of thousands of Bangladeshi farmers. Not even being able to recover their production costs, many farmers have simply dumped their produce. The policy makers' import decisions have cost them dearly. To cite a couple of examples, import of cheap rice at zero tariff, following the flash floods of 2017, caused a glut in the market, which got exacerbated when farmers re-bounced with a bumper harvest in the next season. Meat imports have continued despite Bangladesh becoming self-sufficient in meat production. Bulk imports of powdered milk is adversely

of such contingencies is always accompanied by a perennial fear of negative shocks to food imports. The first thing that we have to secure, beyond protecting the people from the direct effects of the contingency, is to ensure adequate amounts of healthy food on our plates. But how?

The answer is obvious. If we want to safeguard ourselves, we will clearly have to create our own resilient domestic food system. It may appear absurd to be speaking of inward-looking strategies in this day and age but our experiences point towards the need for a renewed focus on food self-sufficiency through the lens of nutritional self-sufficiency. Covid-19 should be taken as a clarion call to build our own capacity to cater to the dietary requirements of our people, independent of

Covid-19 offers businesses a chance to shine

Attention to employees and supply chains will help define the "S" in ESG leadership

CURTIS S. CHIN and ABHINAV SEETHARAMAN

BUSINESS leaders, take note. Committing to models of virtuosity, sustainability and the strongest environment, social and governance (ESG) standards when times are good is one thing. Adhering to these principles, including in one's supply chain, when the going gets tough is another matter.

This reality has very real implications for the most vulnerable, including migrant workers—many of whom come from South Asia, including Bangladesh and Nepal.

A very real case in point emerged this year involving glove manufacturers, whose sales have spiked due to coronavirus-driven fears and demand. Malaysian glove manufacturers who supply medical and rubber gloves globally were accused of mistreating workers. This included allegedly subjecting migrant workers to forced labour and overtime, withheld wages and confiscation of passports.

According to human rights organisations, the problem stems in part from recruitment fees, which were to be repaid by migrant workers through "debt bondage". The resulting "trial by social media" helped drive necessary changes that the most responsible businesses would have embraced early on.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc across the Indo-Pacific region—not just in South Asia—displacing populations, challenging governments and healthcare systems, and stretching the limits of "conscious capitalism" in some of the world's largest economies and most developed nations. This includes in South Asia, where India recently passed Brazil to become the second worst-hit country in terms of coronavirus infections,



File photo of migrant workers, mostly from Bangladesh, queuing to collect free masks and have their temperatures taken in Singapore.

PHOTO: REUTERS

after the United States. Covid-19 cases topped 4.5 million in India by the second week of September.

Even wealthy Singapore, with its exemplary governance, infrastructure, and business environment, has faced challenges. We see this firsthand as the city state is home to the Milken Institute Asia Center, where we both serve as fellows of this non-profit, non-partisan economic think tank. Local news reports have documented well how a lack of attention early on to foreign workers in dormitories led to the majority of the city's Covid-19 infections.

During this public health crisis, the best—and not necessarily just the biggest—companies and large family businesses across Asia should step up and forward in their treatment of employees at home and abroad. Business owners, executives and investors can help ensure that the long-touted ESG leadership is not simply a buzzword from when times are good. This includes companies that rely on a Bangladeshi workforce whether on their own payroll or that of their suppliers.

Though the forms and approaches will be different, cross-sector partnerships by

businesses are vital in any all-nation solution to the challenge of Covid-19. Civil society—in its varying and contrasting forms—also must be engaged, and governments at all levels will have to play a role, whether through policy changes or direct or indirect financial support.

Regardless of what laws mandate, all stakeholders must focus on what the virus poses for ESG standards implementation in all their markets and, critically, throughout their supply chains. While the best environmental and governance practices have been embraced by many companies, their true test now emerges in the "S," or social issues space.

Traditionally, the "S" in ESG has covered several topics, including product safety and consumer protection, labour practices, workforce diversity, and human rights across a company's supply chain.

How companies treat their employees in a given market—and increasingly how their suppliers treat their employees down the supply chains—at this time will influence how their business and product brands are perceived long after the pandemic. This will include treatment of female workers, contract employees including migrant workers, and part-time staff.

Economic challenges are significant. Countries face what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects to be the worst recession since the Great Depression. According to the International Monetary Fund's June 2020 world economic outlook report, the global economy is projected to shrink by 4.9 percent in 2020, a stark contrast to the 3.3 percent global GDP expansion for this year that it forecasted in January.

The coronavirus has tremendously

disrupted business and society. Companies continue to cut costs and re-evaluate their workforces, and countless employees live in fear over their job security.

Growing job loss numbers underscore the scale of the global coronavirus shock. In the United States, unemployment filings reached more than 26 million by the third week of April, nullifying all job gains made since the end of the last recession. And in economies with limited social safety nets and where large portions of the workforce constitute the informal sector, the loss of a job can be even more devastating on individual households.

Amidst these challenges, however, anecdotes abound of businesses vowing to take care of their workforce through a variety of new measures and programmes. Numerous smaller businesses with significantly fewer resources have also stepped up to strengthen safety nets for their employees. For migrant workers, a simple, powerful change would be businesses agreeing to pay off recruitment fees, freeing workers from any upfront debt.

Good leadership is innovative. Difficult times call for all companies—small, medium, and large, and family-owned, privately-held or publicly-listed—to work towards greater employee security. Protecting employees today will enable businesses to establish a strong foundation for continued success and legitimate ESG bragging rights in a post-pandemic world, whether in Bangladesh or elsewhere.

Curtis S. Chin, a former US Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, is the inaugural Asia Fellow of the Milken Institute. Abhinav Seetharaman is the Princeton In-Asia Fellow at the Milken Institute Asia Center in Singapore.

QUOTABLE Quote

NOAM CHOMSKY
(Born 1928)
American linguist.

If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Really succeed
- 6 Moon of Saturn
- 11 Like gymnasts
- 12 Draw out
- 13 Great ideas
- 15 Harden
- 16 In addition
- 17 Badminton need
- 18 Light brown
- 20 Winter song
- 23 Sun-powered
- 27 Singer Jackson
- 28 Luke's sister
- 29 Clark's partner
- 31 Kilt's cousin
- 32 Bear weapons
- 34 Corn unit
- 37 Dry - bone
- 38 Sad state
- 41 Barrages of

DOWN

- 1 Yaks it up
- 2 Storybook monster
- 3 Decree
- 4 Ring Legend
- 5 Tourist's car
- 6 Wyoming range
- 7 Wedding words
- 8 Rotate
- 9 High point
- 10 Egg holder
- 14 Boar's mate
- 18 Bar mixer
- 19 Egg parts
- 20 "East of Eden" son
- 21 Pub pint
- 22 Uncooked
- 24 Oahu souvenir
- 25 Vacuum's lack
- 26 Maze runner
- 30 On the agenda
- 31 Cloth sample
- 33 Cart puller
- 34 Engrave
- 35 Wrong
- 36 Harvest
- 38 Small songbird
- 39 Troubling sign
- 40 Catch sight of
- 42 Abel's mother
- 43 Smeltery supply

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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A S S T R A D E S
P O E T S
Q U O T E S C O P
A U S T E N T R U E
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