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Bangladesh performed better in combating hunger

But we still have a long way to go

IT is good news that Bangladesh has moved 13 notches up from last year's 88th position, ranking 75th out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020. We commend the government for making this progress. We did better than Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, particularly in the agriculture sector. However, we are lagging far behind Sri Lanka and Nepal among the South Asian countries in combating hunger. The report also mentioned that Bangladesh has a level of hunger that is "serious".

The GHI score is calculated based on four indicators—undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting and child mortality. Although the government, along with national and international NGOs, have been working hard to overcome these four obstacles to free the nation of hunger, we still have a long way to go. Data between 1991 and 2014 for Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan shows that stunting is concentrated among children from households facing multiple forms of deprivation, including poor dietary diversity, low levels of maternal education and household poverty. Also, the rates of child mortality and undernourishment are still quite high in these countries.

While Bangladesh has made extraordinary progress in reducing extreme poverty over the last few decades—between 2000 and 2018, the proportion of the population living below the international poverty line dropped from 34.5 percent to 11.3 percent—still, approximately 20 million people are trapped in poverty in the country. To free this large population from the curse of hunger and poverty, our poverty eradication programmes need to be strengthened through innovative and multi-dimensional approaches.

Although, according to the GHI report 2020, we did better in the agriculture sector, it has to be noted that the report has not presented the impact of Covid-19 on hunger and undernutrition. The pandemic and this year's devastating floods have created much uncertainty in the employment sector and in food production, which will undoubtedly increase hunger and poverty in the country, as influential think tanks of the country have predicted. Since the pandemic has undermined food and nutrition security for many, its effects will likely ripple into the future. This means special attention needs to be given to increase and diversify our food production and to reduce hunger, undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting and child mortality.

Global brands continue to squeeze suppliers

High time brands put their money where their mouth is

SEVEN months since the onset of Covid-19, the RMG industry in the country appears to be reeling from the initial shock of losing out billions of dollars in cancellations and postponement of orders from at least 1,931 global brands. Following a massive international #PayUp campaign, some of the biggest brands made public commitments to pay in full for orders completed and in production, which helped the industry turn around within a short period of time—although not before tens of thousands of workers were laid off and terminated at the height of the pandemic. However, a recent report by the Center for Global Workers' Rights (CGWR), published in association with the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), warns that the worst may be far from over, as brands and retailers are continuing to exert undue pressure on suppliers as they place new orders during the continued Covid-19 pandemic.

A survey of 75 suppliers from 15 countries between July 5 and August 21, 2020 shows that in 65 percent of cases, buyers demanded price cuts on new orders and on average, buyers told suppliers they must cut prices by 12 percent, relative to last year's price for the same product. Furthermore, suppliers surveyed said they have to wait 77 days after they complete and ship customers' new orders to receive payment, as opposed to 43 days prior to the pandemic. A majority of suppliers said they have less than half the order volume now relative to the same period last year and that they dismissed at least 10 percent of their workers, and are anticipating another 35 percent if current trends continue.


The global supply chain is inherently unequal, in which big brands exercise tremendous power to negotiate terms that suit their interests at the cost of suppliers—which, in the end, are borne by workers. The pandemic has brought to the fore how little brands, who otherwise make grand statements about upholding worker rights, truly care about the vulnerability of workers down their supply chain. Thus far, some brands, such as H&M, have signed a Call to Action which commits them to work with governments and financial institutions to mobilise sufficient funding to keep manufacturers in business including payment of wages, as well as income-support and job-retention schemes to address the impact of the crisis. However, it does not obligate the signatory brands to commit to any payment themselves.

It is high time we ask them to put their money where their mouth is, and honour their commitments to their suppliers, rather than use the latter's financial stress in the pandemic as bargaining leverage to further squeeze them on price. Furthermore, if and when workers are laid off due to unfair purchasing practices, brands must commit to paying a significant share of the workers' unemployment benefits. We urge countries that are home to these brands to play their part in ensuring fair practices and prices.

One by one, the doors are being shut

The ever-shrinking space for freedom of opinion

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

military, police and other law enforcement agencies." The statement, signed by senior information officer of the ministry, further condemns "spreading false and baseless news about the security forces that is threatening to ruin the peace in the country and spreading fear, concern and confusion among the general public." The statement ends with the threat that anyone not complying will face legal consequences.

Nothing is told, no information shared and no explanation given as to what triggered such a dire and all-encompassing gagging statement and what are the facts that brought the home ministry to such conclusions. We know from experience that an informed public is the most effective bulwark against rumours, fake news and attempts to disrupt peace, and conversely an uninformed one is most vulnerable to "incitements and confusion."

The general public and the media have no idea what the home ministry is talking

Can't a student express the view that he or she is unhappy with the what, how and why, and the manner of what is being taught? Will reporting the frequent absence of a teacher amount to showing "disrespect"?

about. What does phrases like "threatening to ruin the peace in the country" mean? What are we to understand from such statements emanating from the home ministry itself that is charged with maintaining internal order and peace? Is the country facing some sort of danger? We need and must know, so that we can defeat

those forces of destabilisation.

Without an elaboration, we consider such statements to be disingenuous at best and downright harmful to the nation at worst. The best way to fight a "threat to peace" and the spreading of "fear, concern and confusion among the general public" is to prepare the public to fight such attempts by sharing information and equipping them to counter rumours and false information. Telling the public of imminent danger without any explanation



An informed public is the most effective bulwark against rumours, fake news and attempts to disrupt peace. This is a representational image. PHOTO: REUTERS

creates the very situation that the home ministry statement is trying to prevent.

However, the home ministry's directives follow several other gagging orders that came before. On April 16, 2020, when media started revealing the unpreparedness of our public health system in handling the spread of Covid-19 and depicting the sufferings of ordinary people, instructions were issued to all nurses working in government establishments not to talk to the media.

Then on April 23, Health Minister Zahid Maleque ordered all health officials, including doctors, not to talk to the media without approval of appropriate authorities.

On May 3, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University—please note that it is a university whose teachers are among the most qualified and whose students are fully capable of holding fact based and scientifically supported views—silenced their staff from talking to the media.

Recently, on October 7, the department of secondary and higher secondary education issued a circular forbidding students and teachers from writing,


generation of problem solving learners or slogan chanting sycophants? When students are prevented from doing anything outside their prescribed syllabus and when the syllabus is itself extremely restrictive, then obviously the students will be prone to rote learning which, we know from experience, produces only paper pushers and not thought expanders. Are they going to take us to a place of pride in the 21st century world?

Take the issue of posting anything on social media that "disrespects any person, institution and profession". Can't a student express the view that he or she is unhappy with the what, how and why, and the manner of what is being taught? Will reporting the frequent absence of a teacher amount to showing "disrespect"? If a teacher posts about the corruption in his or her own institution, will that be "disrespecting" an institution? Will reporting the sexual misconduct of a teacher amount to disrespecting the teaching "profession"?

Teachers are supposed to perform the vital task of imparting knowledge. When they are warned against doing

Covid-19 and the economic challenges for South Asian countries

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

ONE of the industries hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies has been the travel and hospitality (T&H) sector. This slowdown in T&H resulted in the complete shutdown of international in-person conferences for academic disciplines. International professional conferences have over the years provided an invaluable platform for researchers, academics and students to network and exchange ideas.

In a noble effort to circumvent the hurdles of the pandemic and to restart academic dialogue, the South Asian Network for Economic Modelling (SANEM), a Dhaka think-tank, organised a three-day online international conference on October 1-3. The theme for the SANEM International Development Conference (SIDC) 2020 was "Covid-19 and Development Challenges."

While most of the 24 papers presented at the conference came from researchers working outside Bangladesh, mostly in India, the concerns they raised had direct relevance for Bangladesh. The scholars swapped ideas with each other on a diverse set of issues: policies to revive their respective economies; how to cope with a possible resurgence of Covid-19 cases; the role of stimulus support in rejuvenating an economy and the importance of effective targeting; and the impact of the emerging vaccination undertaking on a battered healthcare system next year.

One of the take-aways from the excellent papers is the validity of the familiar theme of "uniformity in diversity" and that many countries are struggling with the same headaches. An African case study highlighted an important paradox with relevance for Bangladesh. Nigeria, like many other countries, is witnessing an economic recovery, and everyone appears to have

gone back to their jobs. But micro-level data also shows that job growth has been beset by shorter work hours plus less pay. In other words, people are working alright but for fewer hours and 20 percent less per hour.

The three-day zoom conference discussed a wide range of issues and offered some interesting findings from India, Nepal, Nigeria, China and other countries. For me, a big attraction was the last session, where a blue-chip panel

The informal sector is vital for economic recovery and more attention needs to be paid to policies to revive this sector. All the countries, both developing and developed, are scratching their heads to come up with ideas.

discussed Covid-19 and development challenges in Bangladesh. The discussion brought together Francois Bourguignon, former chief economist at the World Bank, Prof Kunal Sen, Director, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki, and Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud and Prof Rehman Sobhan of Bangladesh.

The lively presentations and the discussions focused on setbacks suffered by many developing countries and the effect on vulnerable groups including women, school-going children and low-income earners.

There was a broad range of agreement on the impact of the pandemic and the areas that need to be addressed

to guarantee the U-shaped recovery that everyone aspires to. The conferees concurred on the following propositions: weaker institutions prolong recovery, poor governance is the Achilles Heels of Bangladesh, India and Nigeria, the healthcare infrastructure was weak and has been decimated by the pandemic, and national governments need to pay special attention to vaccination distribution and administration.

Prof Rehman Sobhan did not mince words from the get-go. "The notion that exists in South Asia regarding reducing poverty, which is largely derived from improved GDP growth, has to be reconsidered."

Rehman Sobhan emphasised the inequities in our healthcare system and appealed again for a renewed effort to address this age-old problem. He also said that there should be strategies to integrate the informal sector into the formal stream and acknowledge their contributions.

Discussing the issue of poverty measurement, he said, "The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerable economic status of the people living slightly over the poverty line."

Francois Bourguignon supported the viewpoints of Prof Sobhan and said, "During this crisis, the economic recession is likely to raise absolute poverty with unambiguous effects on inequality."

Kunal Sen pointed out that the pandemic has hurt the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in all areas, except one. "The Covid-19 pandemic has affected most SDGs, except SDG-13 (climate action). It has caused a reversal in gains in alleviating poverty and backtracking in globalisation," said Sen.

Prof Selim Raihan, the moderator of the panel discussion, was kind enough to invite me to ask a few questions. I asked Kunal Sen to touch on the question Abhijit Banerjee asked: Should we reformulate or reorder the 17 SDGs? On Bangladesh, my concern was triggered by a recent Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey which establishes that while an economic recovery was happening, there were doubts about bounce backs of income and consumption. According to

anything that affects the "image of the government", what sort of knowledge will they be imparting?

The issue of concern is that the notice to the department of secondary and higher secondary education was not about quality control but about thought control. For decades, we have written about the quality of education, of the archaic nature of our curriculum and the need to modernise it, of the quality of our textbooks, about the quality of our teachers, the lack of their retraining programmes, the differences between the quality of urban and rural schools, etc; and yet, the note does not address any of these vital issues but focuses on whether anything is being said or done that is critical of the government.

At each level, we are throttling the development of the free mind.

The fundamental question is, where does freedom of thought and expression, guaranteed by our constitution, stand in light of all these directives? Nurses and doctors cannot talk about the health sector, teachers and students cannot talk about education, and the general public cannot talk about the police, other law enforcement agencies and the government. I suppose the question to ask of the government is, what *can* we talk about?

The biggest harm that these statements by various ministries are doing to the government is sowing a seed of mistrust. It seems that the government does not trust the nurses, doctors, teachers, students and the general public. Doesn't this amount to the biggest show of no confidence by the government on its own people? Doesn't it mean that the government assumes that if the people are allowed to speak, they will speak against them? Otherwise, why these restrictions? It must be said that we already live under many restrictive laws, the most prominent and obnoxious being the Digital Security Act. With these new restrictions by different ministries imposed on people under them, the government is further stifling the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression.

Exactly when the people need to be in touch, need to exchange ideas, strengthen each other's morale through shared experiences and articulate divergent views so that we can devise a way out of the pandemic, point out what's working and what's not—fewer restrictions are being put on our freedom of expression.

One by one the doors are being shut, the lights are being extinguished, windows are being shuttered and voices are being throttled, leading to an overwhelming sense of fear, anxiety, claustrophobia and frustration.

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Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star.

BBS, household monthly income dropped by around 20 percent while expenditures also decreased by 6.14 percent during the pandemic. While government employees and teachers suffered the least, students and labourers fared the worst. These weak spots would impede our growth next year once vaccines become available. Not only would the vaccines need to be distributed to the neediest citizens but might give rise to a logistics, storage (with dry ice) or refrigeration nightmare and overwhelm the poor health infrastructure. Also relevant were the cost and the burden of vaccination, as well as the equity of the distribution.

Obviously, it is hard to summarise all the excellent ideas and information in a short essay. Nonetheless, I will list a few in one-liners. The informal sector is vital for economic recovery and more attention needs to be paid to policies to revive this sector. All the countries, both developing and developed, are scratching their heads to come up with ideas to meet the challenge of entitlement but also to boost demand. If the public saves the stimulus checks, the economy will hurt.

The conference also provided a learning opportunity for future conference organisers. First of all, online conferences have their limitations. Conferees are able to doze off or step out of the "room" without raising hackles. Secondly, the quality of sound and available bandwidth speed can create problems. Because the network strength in different countries vary considerably, audio or video can be dropped at critical moments. Finally, participants who have to rely on the chatroom to ask a clarificatory question or "raise their hand" may often find themselves waiting for their turn when the moderators are going by the clock. On the brighter side of things, while the pandemic closed down international conferences and exchange of ideas face-to-face, researchers now have more time to connect via electronic means since travel time is zero!

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