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Post-pandemic education must adapt to new reality

The govt. must ensure that no student is left behind

THE unprecedented global pandemic that hit us early this year has, aside from exposing the cracks in our healthcare system, also brought under the spotlight the disparities that exist within our education system. For almost all of this year, our students have been kept out of classrooms, and there are fears this will continue well into 2021. While the entire world has scrambled to adapt to this ‘new normal’ and continue to provide education, Bangladesh too has attempted to meet the needs of over four crore students through remote learning.

However, this has only exposed how dependent our education system is on traditional classroom learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, many educational institutions, especially public ones, found it difficult to shift to online learning, creating a public-private divide. A huge digital divide between urban and rural students, and between students belonging to different social classes, quickly became obvious, and there were concerns about students from rural areas with poor connectivity missing out on their education, thus further deepening social inequalities. The economic burden created by Covid-19 only added to the worries of resources being taken away from education, leading to greater dropouts, child labour and child marriage.

Against this backdrop, experts have suggested that it is high time for the government to introduce “blended learning”, combining online education and traditional face-to-face classroom teaching, as well as airing recorded lessons and engaging in other forms of innovative remote learning and resource-sharing methods. However, the key word here is “innovation”—something which has, unfortunately, been lacking from our education system for a while now. The classes being shown on television for students across the country, in order to bridge gaps in access to the internet and related devices, have been criticised for being dull and repetitive, thus failing to hold children’s attention. Dependency on rote memorisation, private tuition, coaching centres and guidebooks mean that even students who do have access to online classes have struggled with their lessons. While more than a crore students of classes 6-10 were promoted based on assignments and without exams, major public examinations have been postponed indefinitely, including JSC, SSC, HSC and university exams, simply because we could not come up with more innovative ways to assess students beyond traditional examination methods. Although certain public universities have decided to hold exams in 2021 following safety measures, most of them have refused to reopen dormitories and have given no instructions for students who cannot afford private accommodation in Dhaka.

While we step into this new year, our education institutions and relevant government bodies must leave behind their traditional rigidities and adapt to the new reality. They must make every effort to reduce the digital divide in Bangladesh to ensure that no student is deprived of their education. If we are to truly adopt blended learning, teachers’ capacities to provide this education must also be enhanced, and the entire process of classroom instruction and examinations must change. But most importantly, the authorities must ensure that the interests of the students are at the heart of all their decision-making and that no student is left behind.

Forced deportation of workers must stop

Host countries should implement a mandatory “migrant protection policy”

ACCORDING to government data shared by Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), the average monthly return of migrant workers in the country increased by four times in the last three months compared to what it was in the previous five months. Data shows that between April 1 and August 27, some 85,790 migrant workers returned home from 26 countries, while the number of returnees increased to a little over 3.26 lakh as of November 30. While many of our workers were deported due to the coronavirus pandemic, many were forced to return due to a fall in global oil price and job losses in tourism, services and construction sectors in the Gulf countries.

Thousands of our workers got stranded after coming home on holiday at the beginning of the pandemic, while others were forced to return by the host countries. Many among them could not fly abroad despite completing all the procedures. A joint survey by Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants and RMMRU this year found that remittance was the only source of income for 57 percent households. Naturally, these families have slipped into poverty amid the pandemic. Reportedly, the government created separate funds of Tk 200 crore and Tk 500 crore as loan support for returnee migrants, and Bangladesh Bank also announced a separate scheme for the returnees. We would like to know an update from the authorities concerned as to how the money was disbursed or whether the schemes were implemented properly.

Our migrant workers have been facing multidimensional challenges as their rights are being violated in many ways. Many were unfairly blamed for Covid-19 transmission in some of the host countries and eventually deported. But during this time, irregular migration on different routes to reach European countries also continued. A large number of our migrants also fell victim to national and transnational trafficking gangs and a number of them had to lose their lives.

We urge the government as well as organisations working with migrants’ rights to put pressure on the host countries to stop forced deportation of workers. Besides, demand should be raised in multilateral forums to implement a mandatory “migrant protection policy” during crisis times, which will include natural disaster, economic recession and health crisis, as stressed by RMMRU. As for addressing the issue of irregular migration, the government needs to adopt some new policies. Its initiative to bring informal grassroots service providers or middlemen under a legal framework to tackle fraudulence is commendable. We hope it will be done without any delay. Furthermore, the government should continue negotiating with the migrant-receiving countries so that the workers stuck at home can have visas and other necessary documents to rejoin their jobs abroad.

The Other Face of Globalisation

Covid-19 and Bangladeshi migrants in 2020



TASNEEM SIDDIQUI

labour market created a scope for the marginalised people of developing countries to benefit from the globalisation process through accessing employment overseas. At the same time, globalisation has also exposed labour migrants to great vulnerabilities including life-threatening situations. The Covid-19 crisis has had an unprecedented impact on the global trade and commerce, yet it is the migrant workers who have borne the cost more disproportionately than any other group, be it national workforce or citizens of a country.

During the whole period of this crisis, migrants have been serving in essential frontline jobs such as health care, transport, construction, agriculture and food processing industries in different destination countries. Lack of protection of these workers is self-evident from the fact that the spread of Covid-19 has been disproportionately higher among the migrant communities; death rate is also the highest among them. In many of the Gulf and other Arab countries, South East Asian or even some of the European countries during the months of March, April, and even May, migrants were seen on roads, shopping areas and other public places desperately looking for food and shelter. In some cases, employers abandoned them, and in other instances, government authorities were busy apprehending them on the pretext that they were in irregular status. Taking advantage of the pandemic, many of these countries even deported them.

Bangladeshi migrants topped the list when it came to infected persons or people who were in sheer need of assistance. Reports have noted that by July 2020, more than seventy thousand Bangladeshis were infected in 186 countries. By December 27, some 2,330 Bangladeshi migrants had succumbed to Covid-19 in 21 countries (Prothom Alo, 28/12/2020). In Singapore, Bangladeshis constituted almost half of the migrants infected with Covid-19. One-fourth of those who died in Saudi Arabia due to Covid-19 are Bangladeshis. Out of the 328 who died due to Covid-19 in the UAE, 122 were Bangladeshis. Along with Gulf and other Arab countries, Bangladeshi migrants were passing their days in acute hunger in European countries such as Spain, Italy or Portugal as well. The countries of destination shrugged off their responsibility of taking care of its migrant workforce to the extent that Bangladesh government had to organise food and medicine for Bangladeshis in different parts of the world. This has been despite the fact that various international normative frameworks and standards—

such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Global Compact for Migration, and Guidelines for Migrants in Countries in Crisis—uphold that during a crisis situation, it is the responsibility of the destination countries to look after the migrants irrespective of their legal status.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE declared Covid-19 testing free for all migrants irrespective of their legal statuses. In reality, Abdul, who died in July due to brain stroke, had informed

live-in female domestic workers suffer way more hardship compared to those workers who stay outside. Covid-19, however, shows that job loss is almost non-existent among the live-in female domestic workers. Nonetheless, in many instances, they had to agree to delayed payment of wages. With all members staying at home for most of the day, their workload had increased manifold. Close scrutiny of their work by the employers as well as dissatisfaction of the employers

Ali used to be paid a small portion of his salary and the rest of the salary used to be cleared at the end of the year. Due to his arrest and arbitrary return, he could not get his payment from his employer. He left behind Tk 500,000 of his hard-earned income in UAE.

The experiences of the Bangladeshi migrants in 2020 demonstrate that violation of the rights of workers is integral to the process of the current form of globalisation. Covid-19 has essentially



It is unfortunate that labour-receiving countries can still get away with exposing migrants to extreme health risks or deporting them without respecting their job contracts.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

his family before he passed away that he had all the symptoms of Covid-19 but was worried to secure treatment due to his irregular status. Many migrants like Abdul may or may not have been infected by the virus, but passed away without treatment because of their fear of arrest and deportation. Migrants in irregular status or those holding so-called free visas for all practical purposes remained outside the purview of health care that these countries were supposed to provide them.

A survey of BCSM and RMMRU on forcibly returned migrants shows that thirty percent of these migrants residing in 17 countries lost their jobs. Another forty percent remained partially employed with a re-negotiated lower wage, and the rest on free visa could not get employment. Without job or access to income, Fazar Ali took money from home to survive. Before returning to Bangladesh from Kuwait, Selim was surviving by spending his savings that he had generated over the last one year to pay for his visa renewal. In this current unregulated globalisation framework, Bangladeshis like Fazar and Selim are the ones who have been subsidising the economies of the destination countries.

The vulnerability of female migrants has brought out a complex dimension of migrants’ vulnerabilities during crisis situations. Under normal circumstances,

did manifest in physical and verbal abuses. Cleaners, manufacturing workers or live-out domestic workers may not have gone through similar physical and verbal abuses, but they lost their jobs either fully or partially. Their sheer survival in destination countries was at stake.

From early April, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Maldives started negotiating with Bangladesh government to take back its citizens who were working in their countries in irregular status. They also pushed the idea of pardoning some of the convicted Bangladeshi migrants if the government brought them back. Arresting and detaining migrants under the pretext of strict implementation of lockdown and drives against irregular migrants were some of the techniques used by the governments of destination countries to deport the workers. Plainclothes members of law enforcing agencies picked up Bangladeshi workers from in front of their residences, shopping centres, roads, food stalls, and put them into detention camps and then deported them to Bangladesh. Shafique, one such worker, remained in one pair of clothes in a detention camp for 28 days. With deep anguish, he said he had taken his shower wearing a plastic packet!

According to the Migrant Forum in Asia, the year 2020 has also witnessed millions of dollars of wage theft. Mohon

exposed that reality. In that sense, there has been little change since the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s, or from the times of oil crisis in 1973. As during the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the global financial crisis of 2009 and 2010, migrants are still being used as the safety valve to cushion the negative outcomes of the crisis.

It is unfortunate that in this age, labour-receiving countries can still get away with exposing migrants to extreme health risks, keeping them effectively outside the health care and other social safety nets, and deporting them without respecting their job contracts or clearing their due wages and other entitlements. The extent of discussion that took place in the recent past on the challenges of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals or those of Global Compact for Migration in the context of Covid-19 does not match the level of discussion that is required on the inability of existing global standards in ensuring the protection of marginalised migrants in crisis situations. The situation of migrants in destination countries during this crisis does warrant a major scrutiny of the rules of the game by all parties for redefining the norms and standards of globalisation.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How to Make Climate Pledges Stick



SHANG-JIN WEI

US has withdrawn from the Paris climate accord, it is easy to interpret them as part of the ongoing geopolitical competition for global leadership. But managing climate change is not a zero-sum game. Here, national competition to strengthen ambitions and policies benefits everyone.

To bridge the gap between pledges and tangible results, we will need to lock in these recent commitments and create incentives for other countries to increase their own climate targets. While Covid-19 lockdowns have reduced global carbon dioxide emissions this year, intensive pre-pandemic emissions are likely to return with a vengeance in 2021.

How can we start truly reducing emissions in a timely, efficient, and fair manner? Over the next ten years, Americans need to reduce their per capita carbon consumption from about 200 percent to about 80 percent above the current Chinese level (from about 18 metric tons of carbon per person per year to ten). Similarly, Germany needs to cut its per capita carbon consumption from about 80 percent above the current Chinese level to below the current Chinese level (from about ten to six metric tons per person per year). And the Chinese need to cap their per capita emissions before the end of the decade, while also moving toward carbon neutrality.

To those accustomed to hearing that China is the world’s largest greenhouse-gas (GHG) emitter, these recommendations may come as a surprise. In terms of annual contributions to atmospheric GHGs, China is indeed the world leader, followed by the United States. But in

terms of individual annual contributions, an average German leads a life that is about 80 percent more carbon intensive than the average Chinese; and the average American’s footprint is about 200 percent larger than the average Chinese.

It is no less important to bear in mind that climate change is caused by the entire stock of atmospheric GHGs, not just the emissions from a given year. Because GHGs dissipate slowly, the cumulative emissions from the Industrial Revolution onward—especially those since 1900—

than China (and most other developing countries) at controlling more visible forms of particle pollution, which is not necessarily the same thing as limiting planet-warming GHGs.

Lastly, rich countries’ imports are typically much more carbon intensive than their exports, which means that their residents are maintaining a high-carbon lifestyle partly by offshoring a portion of their emissions to other countries. This is true for rich countries that run a balanced trade account, and it is even more the case



It’s time to move beyond finger-pointing and working toward a uniform carbon tariff and tax regime to increase the costs of emissions globally.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

do more damage than the emissions in, say, 2018-20. From this cumulative point of view, the US and Europe are responsible for an overwhelming majority of atmospheric GHGs, dwarfing the contributions of all other countries combined.

And yet, not all advanced-economy citizens feel this responsibility, for at least three reasons. First, we hear constantly from politicians and the media that China is the “largest emitter,” which, though true, is not the whole truth. Second, Europe and the US are doing a much better job

in countries that run a large merchandise trade deficit. Americans, for example, have a substantially more carbon-intensive lifestyle than the country’s domestic carbon production may suggest.

To go beyond the currently deficient commitments under the Paris climate agreement—and to make up for the time lost under outgoing US President Donald Trump—we need both new pledges and new sticks and carrots. For starters, all rich countries should aim to achieve carbon neutrality on the consumption side, not just on the production side, no later than

2050. Those that can reach this target sooner should of course do so.

Moreover, all of today’s middle-income countries should aim to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. Because the carbon intensity of developing countries’ exports is often higher than that of their imports, a net-zero emissions pledge is a taller order on the production side than it is on the consumption side. The international community needs to provide technical and financial assistance to low- and lower-middle-income countries, conditioned on their efforts to achieve near-carbon neutrality by 2075.

We can do better than relying just on national pledges and voluntary compliance. A uniform structure of tariffs on carbon-intensive imports and domestic taxes on CO2 emissions for Europe, North America, China, Japan, and like-minded countries would substantially raise the cost of emitting GHGs globally. The revenue from carbon tariffs and taxes can be used to support not only renewable energies but also innovations to reduce the costs of carbon capture and storage.

A carbon tariff would make it costlier for China to walk back on its recent climate commitment, because its carbon-intensive exports would become less competitive. It also would make China *more willing* to fulfil its pledge, because it would lose less business to other exporting countries that have lower environmental standards. And, of course, without the US and China’s participation in any international carbon tariff system, the scheme would not cover enough global imports and consumption to be effective.

US President-elect Joe Biden’s victory and China’s new climate pledge together represent a new opportunity to tackle carbon emissions. We should seize it before it vanishes.

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