Health care in slums: No strategy works

SABRINA RASHEED and GEORGE SMITH

BANGLADESH has two health care delivery strategies-cum-systems because its urban and rural populations have different structures and different needs. But Bangladesh has a third distinct population center: urban slums. To create a health care system in the slums that effectively delivers its services we must fix in our minds that it is an entire system that must be addressed, and it must be addressed holistically.

Before considering the system, we should understand some things about the slum population. It is composed of disadvantaged people who are at high risk. Those in the slums are displaced rural people whose understanding of how to obtain health care comes from their rural experience. In villages they seek care from village doctors and are accustomed to being guided through their health care needs and the health care system by community health outreach workers.

Village doctors and the community health workers are both trusted community members. But community, as its known to rural villagers, does not exist in the slums. Dhaka's slums give makeshift shelter to millions of rural poor who migrate hoping that the city will provide better lives. Often, they do find better income and perhaps more hope, but in many ways the quality of their lives suffers.

Proximity to health care is better in slums than in rural Bangladesh. But nearness doesn't translate to

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better access because people in the slums don't know how to use the urban health care system. Urban health care is facility rather than outreach based. In urban areas, there are relatively few outreach workers to act as system guides. Without that guidance from someone intimate with the system, even when people from the slums go to health care facilities they receive poor care because they don't know how to negotiate the system. Feeling shabbily treated, many will not return to the facilities even when in serious need of health care.

Though in recent years NGOs

have incorporated outreach workers into their slum health care projects, thus far the NGOs have failed to account for the better money earning potential women have in slums than in rural areas, leading to high attrition rates among the outreach workers. Experimentation continues with these outreach and delivery systems, but a satisfactory design has yet to be devised.

Problems of health care delivery in the slums are further exacerbated by the migratory nature of slum populations. If a population is stable, once a programme is established, little enrollment effort is

needed. In slums, for programmes to effectively reach the population, enrollment activities must be ongoing. Additionally, the general rule for programmes is that to continue to receive funding and support they must show effectiveness. With a migratory population, it is difficult both to track the population you have served and to provide service to individuals for long enough to show improvement.

Let's delve into an example of how the inability to get families in slums into the health care system and reach them with preventative care leaves slum children vulnerable.

Studies have revealed that people in slums have better food security than the rural poor, meaning that better quality and higher amounts of nutrient-dense foods make it into slum households than into households of the rural poor. Despite better availability of nutrient-dense foods, however, infant and young child nutrition is worse in the slums.

In rural areas, health outreach workers counsel the caretakers of malnourished infants and young children, helping nutritional status improve before illness occurs. With the lack of outreach workers in the slums and the aversion to the clinics,

care is not sought until illness is acute and then the care comes in the form of pills rather than nutritional counseling.

To address the special circumstances and problems of the slums, we must think holistically, fixing problems and improving situations through planning. Many health problems in the slums are related to their unhygienic conditions, but fixing those conditions is out of the purview of the health care system. The health care alone system cannot fix health problems, but it can act as alarm bell in the face of health crises.

When emergencies strike, hospitals know. We can use the health care system to gather and disburse information to other sectors. If contaminated water is causing a diarrheal outbreak, hospitals will know and be able to track down the tainted water source. Water department engineers can then be called in to fix the problem. Such systematic approaches have been taken by smaller-scale projects; we need to figure out how to bring those approaches to scale.

If Bangladesh is to meet its health and development goals, policy makers must acknowledge that slums house a different population and are in need of new strategies. Health care and related systems must be considered together and planning must address what slum populations need now and what we can expect them to need in the future.

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E-governance to make structural changes

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

BANGLADESH will celebrate its golden jubilee in 2021. The present government, in its election manifesto, declared that it would bring changes to make the country poverty free, healthy, socially sound, economically strong and technologically powerful by 2021. To attain this vision, Bangladesh needs a strong administrative structure, with sound knowledge of modern technology and intricacies of development issues, supported by integrity and imbued with patriotism.

The nation needs improved governance so the people can have total confidence in the government because of its efficiency and capability. The situation prevailing now does not give a sense of credibility, instead, it creates confusion. In fact, the problem of governance is a critical issue, which affects sustainable economic growth and social development. The key governance dimensions that have emerged are mainly unwanted -- weak institutional capability and negative attitude towards technological adaptability.

The corruption in public institutions paints a gloomy picture, leading to a frustrating scenario. Any change to achieve a workable arrangement to attain targets of development inevitably demands result oriented performance of the government, and entails policy reformation in both the private and the public sector, global and local arrangements, formal structures and informal norms and practices, and spontaneous and intentional systems of control.

The prime minister, while speaking at the first reunion of the National Defense College on December 20, reaffirmed her commitment to introduce e-governance in public administration to ensure development and make more avenues of interactions between government and its citizens, and thereby nourish democracy in real terms at all levels.

She said that certain sectors had already gone online, like banking, tender process, examination result etc. The PM specifically mentioned the installation of 4,500 computer centres at union level, indicating a remarkable structural change that connects the central administration with the rural network.

But many people are uncertain about the extent of application of e-governance and its sustainability in view of the acute shortage of electricity, the investment required, scarcity of technical know-how, mass illiteracy and above all poverty.

The common people do not have any perception about digitalisation. Installation of a few computers in some offices without knowledge of operation or programming cannot be termed as success of the digital approach. In fact, electronic governance

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means online government, indicating digital interactions between government and citizens (G2C). It may be interaction between government and businesses (G2B) and government and agencies (G2G).

It is the use of a range of modern information and communication technology by the government, such as internet, local area network, mobiles etc., to improve its efficiency and effectiveness in providing service delivery and also promoting democratic interactions at the grassroots. E-governance can transform service delivery to citizens, provide access to information to empower citizens, enable their participation in government by creating economic and social opportunities so that they can improve their lives.

But no investment or reformation can yield a significant result if it is not backed by a powerful and strong administration to ensure good governance at all stages of planning and implementation.

The mainstreaming of good governance is, therefore, very urgent. Effective human resources management is needed to establish good order in the society, with transparency and accountability in administration, to attain the objectives of Vision 2021. The government is the main actor in governance of the state affairs. Other actors are the media, lobbyists, international development partners, multi-national corporations etc. The quality of governance is determined by its impact on the lives of citizens and their empowerment, and by public perception of the role of government in establishing rule of law.

Henri Fayol, a management scientist, developed a systematic 14-point treatment of private management. Second generation theorists drew upon private management practices for administrative sciences. In late 1990, Janet and Robert Denhardt proposed a new public service model. The new model envisages digital era governance focusing on themes of re-integrating government responsibilities, needs-based holism and digitalisation (exploiting the transformation capabilities of modern IT and digital storage).

In Australia, a not-for-profit e-democracy project is functioning now, which invites politicians,

senior public servants, academics, business people and other key stakeholders to engage in high-level policy debate. This is the best example of how to ensure people's participation in the administration and policy formulation.

In India, the government has formulated a national e-governance plan to support the growth of e-governance. The plan envisages creation of the right environment to implement G2G, G2B, and G2C etc. To ensure inter-operability among e-governance applications, the government has set up an institutional mechanism for formulation of standards through collaborative efforts.

In Denmark, local government reform took place in 2007 with the total application of e-governance, and counties were abolished and five regions were created. Eventually the number of municipalities was reduced from 227 to 98.

In a country like ours, some people blame politicians for encouraging corruption and creating bottlenecks on the way to better governance. Some say that the bureaucracy is not loyal to the party in power and distorts the instruction of the government, thus creating a very bad image of the government. Sometime in March, the government decided to place some politicians in high positions of the bureaucracy, which generated a debate throughout the country.

Whatever might be the background, in these days of information superhighway there should be a systematic improvement in governance to make structural changes with modern technology and introduction of egovernance with quality management and strong monitoring system.

The people want to see significant development of the nation, both economically and structurally. Thus, for the sake of development, e-governance should be integrated with all affairs of the public administration and in a planned manner, identifying the areas where it is feasible, practicable and desirable, to retain the confidence of the people.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former adviser to the caretaker government.

RAB under fire

We are talking about going back to 1972 constitution and in that constitution article 31 states clearly our Right to protection of law: To enjoy the protection of the law, and to be treated in accordance with law, and only in accordance with law, is the inalienable right of every citizen, wherever he may be, and of every other person for the time being within Bangladesh, and in particular no action detrimental to the life, liberty, body, reputation or property of any person shall be taken except in accordance with law.

We cannot possibly have a double standard in this country and Sheikh Hasina and her government must prove to us that they are not party to those information that Wikileaks cables leaked out. I hope AL will understand the political implications of it.

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

TIB

We feel sorry when government personnel make such comments without considering the deeper fact. I believe they also know what exactly the fact is. But may be it is their inner nature to reject anything that goes against them. If we want to correct things, then we must find out where lies the flaw. And only then we can take corrective measure.

Dear government personnel, please be assured that once you accept a fault of yours or your organisation, the people will not necessarily blame you for that. So please be proactive and don't find unnecessary and unreasonable relation with TIB's report and war crime trial.

We would like to thank you for your initiative to hold war crime trial and at the same time we hate to see you being mocked.

Jabed Hasan

The attitude of going after the messenger is indicative of immaturity of governance. Interestingly both BNP and AL(Government) party lawyers are collaborating in defending the indefensible status quo. An attitudinal change as your editorial asks, is needed.

Dasverma

There is no basic disagreement with this editorial. A blanket look of the TIB report will not reveal either the intention of report trading or the impact of the exercise carried out every winter at the COST public exchequer from abroad. We do not know how much satisfied the donor is with the report or public reaction. We can benefit if the TIB publish their reaction as the founder and custodian of the report.

I think inconsistent role model changing from regime to regime is a matter of concern to us. They must clean their image and be ready to perform under a professional watchdog commission, who can rightly analyse their report with any hidden intention, so they do not become so careless or careful to tarnish the image of the judiciary so bluntly without any proof.

This is a real bad work and bad choice to offer for public consumption.

We want to evaluate the performance of the TIB by their success, so far it is nil and not visible as they admit in their reporting. What is the cost of this public service?

A Bangladeshi abroad

TIB's survey and people's voices are same so AL government should take it in a positive way and try to concentrate how they eradicate corruption from our society. They should understand what are the reasons of corruption. Scarcity of goods and service, lack of transparency, bureaucracy and cushion of safety available for the corrupt are main points where necessary steps needed to minimize corruption. Two years already passed so there is no way to divert it backward. Every minister should realise the truth that they are elected and selected for people.

A.K.M. Ali Reza