

Why should govt. assistance package exclude Boro farmers?

There is still time to help them

THE government's relief package of Tk 5,000 crore for the agriculture sector surprisingly does not cover crop and cereal producers such as Boro cultivators, even though Boro accounts for more than 50 percent of the country's total rice production. The agriculture ministry justified its decision saying that it's too late to aid Boro cultivation. However, experts and farmers disagree, saying that it's only in the haor region of Sylhet division where Boro harvest has already begun. In other parts of the country, the crop will be harvested next month.

The assistance that the government refused to provide could have helped small farmers the most, who account for 78.62 percent of farmers, according to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. The fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic is set to cause huge losses for the farmers many of whom are already getting discouraged from continuing farming amidst such losses.

One major concern during any crisis, as also portrayed by this one, is a potential food shortage. And it is always the farmers who we rely on to save us when such circumstances arise. Yet, for whatever reason, the government is once again failing them. If farmers are forced out of business or discouraged from continuing to farm, how will the country's population manage in a crisis situation when importing food becomes impossible? The short-sightedness of the government and its failure to aid Boro farmers, particularly given the existing reality, is a major let-down.

It isn't only a lack of cash incentive that agricultural producers and experts are worried about. Farmers are facing a host of other problems concerning loans, manpower, machinery, etc. And the government should have ensured that farmers have all the necessary assistance right now, no matter how much it has on its plate.

The government needs to wake up to the current reality. It needs to take into account the advice of farmers who are actually the ones we all depend on for our food security. Accordingly, it should provide immediate assistance to Boro cultivators.

Uniform mechanism needed to detect suspected cases, collect samples

Confusion about Covid-19 transmission level may lead to a disaster

IT is worrying to learn that the low number of Covid-19 positive cases in Bangladesh could be due to flaws in detecting suspected cases and collecting samples. While other countries struggling with the virus have a much higher rate of infection at stage 4 of the outbreak, the number of positive cases in Bangladesh at the same stage is still very low. As of April 15, the authorities tested 14,868 samples in total and confirmed 1,231 positive cases across the country, which means the infection rate here is only 8.2 percent.

The fears expressed by the experts have valid grounds because of the disparity in the number of cases found in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and the 15 other testing labs across the country. The BSMMU has found a higher number of positive cases compared to the other testing facilities where the number of negative cases still remains higher. According to our report, from April 1 to April 12, the BSMMU lab detected 136 positive cases from 369 samples, which means around 34 percent of all the samples tested positive.

So why this disparity in the number of positive cases when all the labs in the country have been using the same PCR technique to conduct the tests? According to doctors and health professionals, there must be some serious flaws in the case selection process and the skills of the lab technicians. The labs that are testing suspected Covid-19 patients must follow a uniform mechanism to select the people they are going to test. A rigorous background check of the patients before carrying out any test is absolutely necessary, which the BSMMU has been doing with much success. If samples are not collected from the actual suspected patients, test results will definitely be negative.

Then comes the issue of sample collection. We need skilled people to collect samples from suspected cases, for which the lab technicians need proper training. Also, there should be a uniform technique to collect samples. While the BSMMU lab has been collecting sputum samples for conducting the tests, all other labs in the country have collected nasal and throat swabs so far. Thus, the authorities need to decide on this, too.

We think the entire testing activity needs to be brought under a uniform mechanism to get the real picture of the Covid-19 outbreak in the country. Only by knowing the real number of infections can we overcome our shortcomings in response, and fight the outbreak efficiently. Otherwise, the shutdown enforced by the government to contain the spread of the virus will be futile.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure safety of emergency service providers

Recently, one of my female colleagues working in a bank was wounded by robbers while she was on her way back home from office. As she struggled to defend herself, the criminals stabbed her. Bankers, like some other professionals in selected sectors, are working during the lockdown. But it is unfortunate that these people have to face various troubles while on the roads. This is unacceptable. The security of those providing emergency services must be ensured. Moreover, the law enforcement agencies need to be aware about those who have the permission to commute and those who don't.

Malik Muntasir Reza, Dhaka



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to continue beyond the approaching Ramadan until the end of May. So what can we say about the millions of students, their learning and their wellbeing?

A BRAC survey of 2,675 households in 64 districts using the network of microcredit groups, carried out between March 31 and April 6, shows that the average monthly income of the sample households has dwindled from Tk 14,599 to Tk 3,742. The bread-earners of these families include rickshaw pullers, factory workers, hotel or restaurant workers, and non-farm day labourers, many of whose income has been reduced to zero. Fourteen percent of the low-income families have no fund left and no job to earn any income. Children from these families are also in school, thanks to the expansion of access to school education.

As part of its relief and support measures, the government has announced a plan to provide a monthly cash aid of Tk 2,000-3,000 to each of 3.4 million families. Cash will be sent out starting from April for three months through mobile fund transfer. Economists argue that at least ten million families need this support to survive through the crisis. Many fear that hunger, not the coronavirus, will kill them.

The school education authorities have so far responded in two ways. They have started broadcasting via TV subject-wise lessons for primary and secondary schools, using the spare BTV channel designated for broadcasting national parliament proceedings. Secondly, being concerned about the disruption of the school calendar, they have suggested some changes in the public and school-based exam schedule.

The education responses to the coronavirus have laid bare the deep-seated problems and shortcomings of our education system. The TV broadcast of lessons, though well-intentioned, are largely ineffective. Half of the children do not have a TV at home, according to a BBS/Unicef survey in 2019. The channel used (Shangshad TV) does not cover many parts of the country. Watching a sample of the lessons, both for primary and secondary school subjects, showed that these were an imitation of the usual classroom lectures—a teacher standing by the blackboard and giving lectures to the students, often with poorly presented visuals.

Watching a sample of the lessons also revealed a deeper problem of the content of learning and the pedagogy practiced in our schools. Very often it is merely a listing of or narrative about factual information that students are encouraged to memorise, rather than an incentive to think, raise questions and figure out answers. Basic facts, terminologies and definitions are important for



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denial, helplessness—emotions that are reflective of being privileged, of having the luxury to dwell on them. For the vast number of poor microbusiness owners, labourers, transport workers, informal-sector employees, and many other groups who depend on daily wages/earnings and have no social safety net, there is now only the pain of hunger, not figuratively, but literally. With the shutdown now extended to a month, these groups are under the real threat of starvation.

There are international conventions and declarations on the right to food, on the right to be free from hunger. Yet an estimated 9 million people in the world are dying of hunger and hunger-related diseases annually, more than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. It is the world's biggest health problem, and with entire countries and economies now under lockdown, it risks getting a whole lot worse for those who live in difficult environments.

The poor and the vulnerable with their erratic and meagre earnings somehow manage to keep fighting and living. Every day is a battle, of continual unpredictability and uncertainty—be it economic or health or both. Being confronted with illnesses and deaths is not uncommon for many of the most marginalised. While there is the fear of the coronavirus, there is also the acceptance that it is yet another addition to an already long list of health challenges that they face. Furthermore, with access

understanding a subject, but it cannot be just factual information without a sense of how these relate to each other, and how they are useful to solve a problem or answer a question.

The uncertainty about how the coronavirus rampage will play out in Bangladesh and other poor countries causes deep anxiety. Is the trajectory likely to be different from that of Europe and the USA? If not, we will be in deeper trouble in two to four weeks. Children feel this anxiety as they are urged to remain confined in their homes; as they see neighbours, friends and relatives infected and even dying; and as more districts and localities come under lockdown. There are reports of increased violence against women and children in families arising from heightened tension and anxieties. All this arguably is a snapshot of the life experience of families



In this file photo of The Daily Star, children attend a class wearing protective masks at a school in Dhaka.

who are poor and disadvantaged in other ways, but now it is magnified many times by the coronavirus devastation.

The ideas about re-arranging exam and admission schedules betray a sense that the temporary disruption will be over and we can soon go back to the normal routine. The assessment of student learning and public exams has always been problematic and a subject of much discussion among education researchers and experts. But there is resistance to change from inertia or just fear of change.

One may recall that a review committee, comprising education experts and academics, was appointed by the Ministry of Education in 2017. It was asked to advise the ministry about enhancing school curriculum relevance and effectiveness and making assessment of learning to support better learning experience. Among other recommendations, the committee

proposed that the public exams be simplified and shortened to include, for grade 10 (SSC), single papers on Bangla, English, science and social studies, completing the examination in four two-hour sessions. Also for grade 12 (HSC), the suggestion was that there could be additional single papers for science, social science and business subjects. It recommended that school-based evaluation should be relied on for other curricular and co-curricular contents.

Similarly, it was suggested that basic competencies in languages, math and science could be tested with a combined one paper for each subject in grade 5 and grade 8 public examinations; school-based evaluation should be used for regular school subjects and co-curricular learning.

However, bureaucratic inertia and change in the ministry leadership

simplified testing should be announced for the next round of SSC, JSC, PECE and equivalent examinations; 3) The terminal examinations in schools should be cancelled for this year and instead the time should be used for lost teaching time when the schools reopen; and 4) The education boards should initiate a programme to work with schools to communicate with and counsel grade 9 to 12 students about their academic, health, safety and personal concerns and anxieties. Similar communication with parents and children should be undertaken by DPE at the primary level.

For the longer term, beyond 2020-21, the following suggestions are made for consideration: 1) The shortened and simplified public examinations should be made permanent and complemented by school-based evaluation both at primary and secondary level; 2) A major initiative



should be taken for using distance, digital and internet-based learning with attention to connectivity, hardware and software availability, accessibility, and affordability in all institutions for all students and teachers; and 3) Redesigning curricula, textbooks, and supplementary learning material, now characterised by factual information and rote learning, should aim at enabling students to engage in thinking, reasoning, understanding and creativity—supported by teacher preparation, change in learning assessment and use of relevant digital learning content by students and teachers.

A lot has been packed into these proposals. These have to be unpacked and fleshed out to make sense of these and to take necessary action. Let the present crisis be the opportunity for much-needed change in school education.

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The dilemma between hunger and a pandemic

to their sparse resources being severely constrained or denied as a result of the shutdown, for many the immediate threat to consumption for survival—and not necessarily the pandemic—is becoming a greater concern. BRAC's rapid perception survey on Covid-19, conducted between March 31 and April 5, 2020, found that 18 percent and 10 percent of urban and rural respondents respectively had no food stored at home, while 37 percent and 21 percent respectively had only 1-3 days' food reserve.

The shutdown or lockdown model has been imported from Western or developed economies with stronger economic bases and better social safety nets for those in need.

Health bodies and governments in different countries have been promoting different measures to contain the pandemic that focus on individual behaviour with little attention to the social, economic and contextual factors. Public health preventions are based on the virus, and individual determinants of health, whereas for millions the stark social and contextual inequalities and realities of how and where they live prevent them from following such precautionary recommendations. Guidelines on social distancing, washing of hands with soap, and staying at home are all very well for the privileged who

can afford to do so. For the poor with 5-6 members crammed in one-room dwellings, sharing irregular water supply and limited latrines in some of the dirtiest and densest places on earth, such messaging must surely feel like some sort of a cruel joke. Add to this the restrictions of the shutdown, and one becomes witness to a dystopian nightmare.

Bangladesh, like many other countries, has rolled out an economic stimulus package to address the severe economic and business fallout from the pandemic. The government is also in the process of unveiling support for the poor. This scheme will also include support for farmers who are critical for ensuring the food supply chain for all of us—the rich, the middle class, and the poor. While this package should really have been the first step taken by the state, it now needs to be implemented efficiently, systematically, and equitably. There are numerous articles and reports detailing the mismanagement and lack of coordination among different bodies involved in distributing the initial state-funded food and/or cash aid programmes. This has to stop. While there is no easy solution or strategy, for Bangladesh and its high proportion of vulnerable population, continuation of the shutdown has to be accompanied with strong political resolve to ensure that people do not go without basic meals and have basic health information and support, given the existing structural constraints. Otherwise, it will be the final nail in the coffin for the poor and maybe even beyond. The trauma and enormity of what will unfold if this is not done properly cannot be emphasised enough.

The shutdown or lockdown model has been imported from Western or developed economies with stronger economic bases and better social safety nets for those in need. But is it the only way forward? China, Hong Kong, Singapore, countries that were successful in containing the first wave of the

coronavirus, are now facing the threat of its resurgence largely due to infections coming from overseas travellers, and some countries have begun reinstating containment measures again. How long can a shutdown be sustained? While this is an entirely unknown territory, Iran's president, for instance, had declared that "low-risk" economic activities would resume from April 11 in spite of the virus not being contained. The Iranian government is thus balancing the risks of the pandemic versus further wrecking a sanctions-battered economy. Sadly, countries with large pools of poor populations may soon be forced to confront a similar tradeoff, with all its moral and ethical implications, if there is no solution soon in sight.

The poor and the vulnerable already live on the edge. The added stress of the pandemic combined with prolonged shutdowns will further amplify their despair and hopelessness. Therefore, while health is a very real concern, for Bangladesh to sustain the shutdown requires all of us to focus all of the country's resources on ensuring that no one goes without food. We have to believe the rest will follow, once this is ensured. If not, as Nobel Laureates Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee highlighted with respect to the situation in India, the poor and the vulnerable will be left with no choice but to break the shutdown for their livelihood.

The last interview of an adolescent street peddler that I read shared, "how much longer? We heard four more days. We have no food, no money." These narratives are typical for most of the poor families we interviewed. Try imagining, if you can, the gut-wrenching panic and anxiety when many of them learn it will be an additional 10 days or more.

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