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# When corruption eats the infrastructure development

Whatever happened to zero tolerance for graft?

A new study made public by Transparency International, Bangladesh has once again revealed just how dire the state of corruption is in the country and how incredibly widespread. The corruption exposed this time concerned important rural infrastructure development projects.

According to the study, block allocation of hundreds of crores of taka made to lawmakers for implementing the projects returned poor benefits because of political influence, nepotism, extortion and the lack of a specific legal framework and monitoring. And the quality of work in about two-thirds of the schemes to build rural roads, construct bridges and culverts under IRIDP was substandard. Yet, that is where most of the money was focused as this way it is easier to divert and siphon funds out of these projects, the report concluded.

Remarkably, researchers could not find any existence of 26 schemes, although final bills for those were withdrawn. And according to estimates, financial corruption among various stakeholders during different stages of tender, withdrawal of final bill and security deposit amounted to a staggering Tk 27.20-41.73 crore.

All this, along with the massive corruption that has been revealed in the recent past, makes a mockery of the ruling party's so-called policy of having zero-tolerance against corruption. Just imagine the amount of development that could have been achieved with all the taxpayer's money that has been wasted simply under one development scheme, and all the people that this could have benefitted. Yet, for decades this continued without any repercussion for those involved, as they mainly belonged to the ruling party or were somehow affiliated with it.

While ordinary people were generally restricted from participating in these projects, lawmakers whose primary role is to hold the government accountable could not resist but involve themselves in the very projects they were meant to be overseeing. And corruption in those projects was predictably high—which is what happens when the fox is allowed to guard the henhouse.

There needs to be some serious reckoning for this. The authorities, who have sat on their hands while all this was going on, need to come out of their slumber and hold those responsible for such extensive irregularities to account. Moreover, the TIB study gives numerous recommendations on how to mitigate mismanagement and corruption going forward which the authorities should urgently adopt.

# Remove inflammable, hazardous goods from Chattogram port immediately

Safe management essential to avert a deadly accident

WE are extremely worried to learn that various types of imported hazardous cargo, including chemical and other inflammable goods, have been kept at the Chattogram port for years, posing serious risks of fires and other deadly accidents. According to the Chattogram Port Authority, these chemical and hazardous goods, imported between 1992 and 2019, are lying around at the designated sheds of the port as those were not delivered or claimed by any importer. What is also worrying is that the containers in which these goods were brought could not be traced. Although the goods should have been auctioned off or destroyed by the customs authorities long ago, no significant steps have been taken over the years to remove them. What this means is that the country's main seaport is at risk of a deadly explosion. Reportedly, a fire broke out at shed no. 3 of the port on July 15 during which there was a small explosion.

According to our report, the P-shed of the port where the hazardous goods are kept lacks modern management for storing such goods for a long time. The current system through which these goods are delivered or auctioned off has serious limitations. In many cases, goods are not delivered or claimed by the importers within the stipulated time. And when it comes to auctioning off the unclaimed goods, a shortage of manpower and failure to provide the correct documents stand in the way of the customs authorities. In the absence of proper management, the port is used as a warehouse of storing such hazardous products.

These problems need to be solved immediately if we do not want to experience any deadly explosion like that in Beirut, Lebanon, last week. Negligence or delay on the part of the port authorities and the customs department in removing or auctioning off the goods are unacceptable.

It is good to learn that the Chattogram Port Authority has formed a committee to assess the current condition of hazardous cargoes in the port. We hope that it will perform its duty properly—make a list of chemical and hazardous goods stored at the P-shed, determine the period of storage, make a list of goods that need to be auctioned off or destroyed immediately, look at the safety and security arrangements at the P-shed and recommend necessary measures, etc. The committee should also look into the laws and regulations of handling such goods and suggest any possible changes to make them effective. Of course, any assessment or recommendation will only be useful if it is put into practice by the relevant authorities.



As an education ministry press release has confirmed yet again, no decision has been taken on Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC), Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Primary Education Completion (PEC) examinations. Thankfully, the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams for 2020 have already been held, but the prolonged school closures and irregular and unequal access to online and TV education have raised concerns regarding the preparations of students planning to sit for SSC exams next year.

While there were rumours that the JSC and PEC exams—scheduled to be held in November 2020—might be cancelled, there have been no confirmations yet. According to a report in this daily, the primary and mass education ministry and the education ministry have sent proposals to the Prime Minister's Office discussing exam cancellations and alternative methods of assessment, but "everything will depend on when schools open". However, the "alternative methods" put forward by the ministries are still very much the same as standardised tests; suggestions include holding regular exams at some point but on a reduced syllabus, or 50-mark multiple choice question exams—a favourite method of assessment in our education system that ends up rewarding students who memorise answers and encourages "either/or" thinking.

Commentators have now started to discuss the worst case scenario—if schools cannot open, exams will not be held at all. But would that be such a bad thing? There are an estimated 3 million PEC examinees, and another 2.5 million students are expected to take the JSC exams. That makes five million children who are experiencing times of unprecedented stress and anxiety, probably the worst that they have ever experienced in their short lives. They will have to deal with the added anxiety of getting through their syllabus and sitting for competitive exams by the end of the year. Could we not come up with less stressful methods of assessment during these difficult times?

For the nearly one million HSC students in Bangladesh, the situation is far more frustrating—their exams were scheduled to be held on April 1 but were postponed in late March when the "general holiday" to stop the spread of coronavirus was announced. Since then, there have been no clear directives for them, except a vague promise that exams would be held when things calmed down. This uncertainty is hanging over the heads of students and their families, who may already be struggling to keep their children in school—a July report by Save the Children warned that almost 10 million children

across the world may never return to school after the pandemic, and that children in Bangladesh are at moderate or high risk of dropout (which may cause child marriage numbers to rise as well).

Imagine being an adolescent facing the very real mental pressure of planning for a "good future" and a stable life within limited resources and unlimited expectations. Now, can you imagine going through that while someone you love is suffering from coronavirus, or while your family is struggling to make ends meet?

Even in ordinary times, the pressure of performing well in competitive exams can have negative impacts on mental health, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. British schools have documented how children as young as six told guardians and educators about feeling exam stress and experiencing anxiety. Every year in Bangladesh, we hear sensationalised stories of students

break out of the traditional methods of education? Why not use predictive grades, encourage students to read and write essays, create individual work projects, and maybe even get students to document their unique experiences of learning during a pandemic, and assess them on that?

Ideally, competitive exams that reward students who memorise from their books should be replaced by more holistic assessments that encourage them to think critically, adapt to specific situations, and engage in problem-solving. The theory of multiple intelligence, put forward by US development psychologist Howard Garner in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, is considered by many to be a guiding principle in modern teaching methods. Garner theorised that people do not just have intellectual capacity but many kinds of intelligences, including musical, interpersonal, spatial-visual, verbal-

properly entered public discourse on education—it took a global pandemic for the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education to even consider cancelling yearly exams for class I, II and III, whereas we have been using standardised tests to assess five to seven year olds since 1972.

However, our inability to consider experimenting with alternative forms of assessment that focus on individual capabilities of students in more personalised classrooms—even during an emergency—doesn't just reflect our top-down, traditional model of education; this inflexible attitude also reveals the culture of discipline and demand for "obedience" that has become the defining feature of our relationships between different generations. While we encourage our children to go to school and aim high, we actively discourage them to think for themselves by trapping them within standardised tests and failing to



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committing suicide after not doing well in SSC or HSC exams, and for a time, we discuss the mental strain of intensely competitive examinations on our young people. Despite that, there is very little research and no official data that focuses on the well-being of students (which can be affected by multiple challenges ranging from economic to emotional)—a telling sign of how little importance we put on the mental health of children in Bangladesh.

Countries across the world had scrapped high-pressure, test-based exams for children under 12 long before the pandemic, and in the wake of coronavirus, many exams for older children have been cancelled and replaced with predictive grades based on class performance. So why, after about five months of missed or irregular attendance in classes, are we only just now considering the question of cancelling exams in Bangladesh, especially for younger children? Why not just cancel them and use this time as an opportunity to come up with alternative methods of assessment that encourage students to

linguistic and logical-mathematical, which are often overlooked in our exam-based education system.

Educators have also stressed the importance of measuring the emotional intelligence and personality traits of children. In a *Medium* article, futurist Raya Bidshahri focused on "21st century skills... critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and imagination, agility and adaptability, collaboration across networks and leading by influence." Critics of standardised tests have pointed out how they fail to measure the progress a child makes during school, or the effort she or he puts into their work.

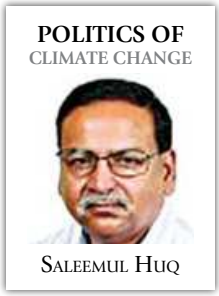
In Bangladesh, these changes can't happen overnight, especially when the education sector is persistently underfunded and undervalued. Despite the pandemic and its related risks for students, the 2020-21 budget did not receive an increased allocation for education, which is currently at only 2.10 percent of GDP. Nevertheless, we should be worried that discussions on these changes have not

implement assessments that would ignite their minds and help them to think critically.

In the same breath, teachers tell students to memorise answers instead of asking questions; parents tell children to follow their commands and focus on studies instead of asking questions; bosses tell employees to do as they're told; and the government tells citizens how to behave. These scenarios are all different sides of the same coin—one that is entrenched in hierarchal and traditional norms of behaviour. They are also the reason why we have time and again discussed the future of our students without actually consulting them. If we are to come up with any real solutions on how to assess examinees during the pandemic, the first step we need to take is to stop acting like they're invisible, and ask them for their opinions. We may be surprised by what we end up learning from them.

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# Four lessons from Covid-19 pandemic for tackling climate change



THE global Covid-19 pandemic is now just over half a year old and arguably still in its early stages. However, there are already a few key lessons that are emerging when evaluating

the responses of different countries to this public health emergency, which are relevant for tackling the much longer-term and much bigger emergency of climate change.

The first lesson is that global problems cannot be kept out by national boundaries even if leaders wish to do so. Whether it is the virus or climate change impacts, they will hit every country in every continent regardless of how rich or poor it is. The corollary to this lesson is, the wealth of a country is a very poor indicator of how successfully it can tackle the problem, as it is evident from the Covid-19 situation in the world's wealthiest country right now.

The second lesson is that the actions of leaders of countries, as well as provinces within countries and even individual cities, made a great deal of difference on the number of excess deaths due to the coronavirus. Those leaders who listened to the experts and took early action—combined with providing sensible and science-led advice to their citizens and enabling (rather than forcing) them to adopt good hygiene, face masks and social distancing—were the ones who managed to keep their respective death rates lower than others. This lesson is useful when it comes to tackling the climate change impacts in the coming years. Our leaders at all levels must listen to the climate scientists and base their actions on the best

available science going forward.

This is not to say that scientists can make extremely accurate predictions of what will happen, but rather that the scientific process is one of learning from actions and practices and adopting policies in light of what we are able to learn.

Let me illustrate this point with a comparison between weather forecasts and scenarios of future climate change. The former is based on meteorological data about the atmosphere from satellites

purpose of the model is to identify what can be done now so that the worst case scenarios can be avoided.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the global scientific body that assesses the outputs from various climate change models around the world and provides the best advice for global leaders on how to avoid the worst case scenarios. It is extremely important that the leaders of each and every country understand that advice and



PHOTO: REUTERS

and other observations, and the short-term predictions over hours and a few days can be very accurate. However, for longer periods running into months, forecasts become more probabilistic than predictive. In the same manner, climate change models which run to the end of the century or even middle of the century are not predictive but rather indicative of what might happen if no action is taken to prevent the worst case scenarios. Hence the

act upon it going forward.

A third set of important lessons emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic relate to the economic consequences of the public health and lockdown measures and also the economic recovery policies and investments that countries are now putting into place. The greatest opportunity here is for the countries to take a good look at what they were doing wrong in the past and how to do better in the future.

This is most relevant when it comes to evaluating our overdependence on fossil fuels like coal, petroleum and even natural gas to meet almost all our energy needs (from industrial to domestic and transport and agriculture). Here, we are seeing a possibility of shifting our future investment in a new direction that is both cleaner and greener, with a greater focus on investing in renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. Unfortunately, the power of the fossil fuel industries and the politicians who they support is working towards returning us to the bad, old ways rather than trying to move us forward to a better, greener and cleaner world.

The last lesson is the synergies and win-win nature of tackling both the climate change emergency and the public health emergency related to air pollution—caused from combustion of fossil fuels which makes cities like Dhaka and Delhi extremely polluted and has conclusively been shown to affect human health and also the death rates of the population. Hence, we can certainly improve the health of our citizens and reduce the emission of greenhouse gases by undertaking an immediate programme to reduce dependence on petroleum for transport and other industrial uses. This new direction is being taken in some countries which we should learn from.

Even though we are still in the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change emergency is going to get worse in the medium term and only improve in the longer term if the world's leaders take appropriate decisions in time, it is already abundantly clear that taking early decisions based on best available science will save millions of lives in the years to come.

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