

PM's laudable initiative to give houses to the homeless

It is an innovative, unique example to follow

WE applaud Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government for inaugurating the Ashrayan 2 project aimed at rehabilitating homeless, landless people of the country, providing them with well-constructed houses with basic facilities. It is truly a remarkable endeavour that has been initiated in commemoration of Mujib Borsho, marking the birth centenary of Bangabandhu.

So far, the PM has already given these houses to 66,189 families who have no land and no shelter to call home. The government has spent Tk 1,168 crore for the first batch of houses constructed. Landlessness and homelessness plague thousands of people in this country. Many have lost their precious homesteads to river erosion or sold off their land to survive or meet family emergencies. Others have never even known what it is like to have a roof over their heads. For such people, being given a house on a piece of land that they can call their own is nothing short of a miracle. What is remarkable about this project is that apart from the houses, the disadvantaged families received ownership papers of two decimal land parcels. This will be a huge relief to these families who constantly struggle to pay rent, sometimes living on the streets when they can't even do that. It will also boost their self-esteem.

The PMO will also rehabilitate 3,715 homeless families in 743 barracks in 44 villages of 21 districts as part of this endeavour. It is impressive that the PMO prepared a list of more than eight and a half lakh people in 2020 that included those who were homeless, landless or had small pieces of land but no houses. Such quick results from a project is quite unique and praiseworthy.

We especially applaud the government for including the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities in the list of beneficiaries of this project. The beneficiaries will be provided with basic facilities such as health, education and utility services. According to Ashrayan's PD, another list has been prepared of almost six lakh families from all over the country, who own land but do not have houses or have homes that are substandard, as part of the Mujib Borsho initiative.

At a time when the pandemic has led to widespread joblessness and economic hardship, this project could not be more crucial and welcome. Targeting the most marginalised groups has been a wise and compassionate approach, and the efficiency with which the PMO has been able to successfully hand over the houses to the beneficiaries shows that it is possible to implement such projects with proper planning and sincerity. We hope that such innovative projects to alleviate the overpowering helplessness of poor, landless people will continue to be initiated in both rural and urban areas and implemented with transparency and honesty. The PM has shown how it is done and this should be an example to follow by her administration.

Vaccine ready for roll-out

But have we prepared the essential priority-based recipients' list?

HAVING received the first consignment of 20 lakh doses of Covishield vaccine as a gift from India—along with the purchase of three crore doses from the Serum Institute of India, of which 50 lakh doses are expected to arrive tomorrow—Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the Covid-19 vaccination programme virtually at the Kurmitola General Hospital on Wednesday. A nurse at the hospital will be the first person to be vaccinated on that day. Later, the piloting will take place across several public hospitals. The vaccination campaign will begin in Dhaka and then will be introduced elsewhere gradually. Each vaccination team will have six members, two vaccinators and four volunteers—the vaccinators will be assigned from the nurses or Sub-Assistant Community Medical Officers (SACMO), while respective officials of vaccination centres will recruit volunteers locally. Health professionals and volunteers are currently being trained for the inoculation campaign.

While this is surely good news for all, we are worried that the government is yet to finalise the list of healthcare professionals and volunteers to be part of the Covid-19 mass inoculation campaign. Needless to say, it would have been an astute approach to keep the list ready as the vaccination programme has been in discussion for quite some time now. According to health officials, the piloting of the mass vaccination will start with 20-25 health workers and other professionals, and a day later, 400-500 people would be given vaccine shots at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Kurmitola General Hospital, Mugda Medical College Hospital and Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital. There will be around 330 vaccination centres across Dhaka for mass vaccination.

We commend the government's swift initiative to carry out the mass campaign nationwide within the given span of time and are hopeful that the training would be completed before the start of the vaccination process. We also hope that health officials can keep track of the recipients in case of any side-effects. At the same time, it is crucial that the list of frontline workers who will receive the shots first is readied immediately. Experts have suggested that doctors and other healthcare workers who have been treating Covid-19 patients should be inoculated first, along with other frontline workers, mainly from the working class, who are more exposed to the virus. The elderly population and those people with pre-existing health conditions must also be a priority. Once underway, the programme needs to be under strict supervision and proper management given the magnitude of the undertaking. We hope eventually every citizen will receive the vaccine in our battle against this pandemic.



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IN 2018, the UN General Assembly proclaimed January 24 as International Day of Education to celebrate the role of education for peace and development. The pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019 kept schools shut throughout the world for most of 2020, and its end is not in sight, forcing us to reflect on the day of education in a different light.

The pandemic has magnified the inequality, exclusion and poor quality of instruction that already existed in the education systems of the low-income countries.

Educationists agree that all children should be able to read by age 10. When children don't read by age 10, or at least by the end of primary school, they face almost an insurmountable handicap. They fail to master the basic tools of learning and keep falling farther behind in their school life, and eventually in life in general.

This phenomenon of cumulative learning deficit arising from the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10 is described by the World Bank as "learning poverty". It estimates that 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries currently suffer from learning poverty, and the level is up to 80 percent in poor countries.

Bangladesh falls squarely in the learning poverty zone. The World Bank, based on national data, estimated that 56 percent of the children in the later stage of primary education in Bangladesh are not proficient in reading at the expected level. The pandemic has added a new twist to the challenge that already existed.

What should be the plan to restart and begin recovery of education? As we already know, school closure has been extended to end of January. Looking ahead, given the uncertainty of the course of the pandemic, there has to be contingency planning, keeping in view different options and fulfilling some essential conditions.

Education Watch, an independent monitoring body, makes recommendations on critical education issues based on evidence from the field. Recently, it examined the question of

when and how schools should reopen. A survey was undertaken in mid-December among about 3,000 students, teachers, parents, school officials and NGO personnel from 72 clusters in 24 upazilas under 8 divisions. In a virtual meeting on January 17, Education Watch presented a six-point action plan to the state minister for primary and mass education, Md Zakir Hussain, and senior officials of his ministry as well as the ministry of

shorter SSC and HSC with fewer subjects; less frequent and shorter in-school exams); reduced vacation time and remedial classes on Saturdays; digital/distance lessons blended with classroom instruction guided by teachers; and teachers' aides recruited through NGOs with government funding.

Supporting teachers

Subject-wise and class-wise guidelines for teachers on the recovery strategy;



Dressed in school uniform but with no classes to attend.

FILE PHOTO: STAR/TITU DAS

education. A summary of the action plan is given below.

Reopening schools

Schools should be reopened in February in non-metropolitan areas and in March in metropolitan areas; reopening in phases, with higher classes (10 and 12) in secondary and (classes 4 and 5) in primary first.

Ensuring safety and health of students and teachers

Wearing masks by students and teachers, handwashing with soap and water, clean toilets and classroom benches and desks sanitised daily; social distance in classroom with attendance in shifts and/or alternate days' classes.

Preparing a two-year recovery plan for learning loss

Abridged syllabus for the next two years focusing on key competencies in Bangla and math at primary; Bangla, English, math and science at secondary; reduced time on exams and more time on teaching (no PSC and JSC/IDC;

workshops and online instructions for teachers for this purpose; incentives for teachers for extra work and effort; vaccination priority for teachers.

Managing implementation of reopening and recovery

Central guidelines allowing flexibility and local adaptation; upazila taskforces involving education and local government personnel and NGOs for planning and monitoring; fund channelled (10 percent of education budgets for FY20 and FY21) to upazilas proportionate to student numbers; and fast-track planning and implementation.

Involving community/civil society

Networks such as CAMPE, Bangladesh Health Watch, and Bangladesh ECD Network, which are the nation's social capital, should be used for local adaptation of plans, mobilising public support, and monitoring implementation.

Clearly, "business as usual," going back to the pre-pandemic normal school day and classroom practices, will not do. An essential step is to put more effort and

energy into actual teaching and learning, rather than spending students' and teachers' time on many examinations, either public or in-school. Students need to be assessed if they are learning as part of teaching rather than through separate formal examinations.

Reopening the schools safely and implementing a recovery plan in each school will require extra resources. Some Tk 66,000 crore are in the current year's education budget, a part of which will not be used for regular activities due to the pandemic. Ten percent of this amount—at least Tk 10 crore for each of 500 upazilas and thanas—can be distributed proportionately by student number to support primary and secondary schools to carry out their recovery plan. Schools not covered by MPO support also should be assisted, since at least a third of the school-going students are in private schools not currently supported by the government.

Completing the lessons for the year and promoting students to the next grade are practical concerns of a school system. In this regard, optimal use of the time of students and teachers is critical. Can the school calendar be made more children and learning friendly?

Two suggestions have been made by education experts: reducing the time lost on various public examinations and school-based examinations, and changing the school calendar from mid-September to mid-June with a long summer break. Such a school year will allow uninterrupted instruction time for students during the best part of the year, climate-wise.

Making the best of the Covid-19 disruption, the next school year may be a short one (February/March to August with minimal holidays), and a new 2021-2022 school year may begin in mid-September.

Awareness campaigns and communication with teachers and parents are critical for successful reopening. The NGOs and community organisations should be part of the upazila working group in providing overall guidance, assistance to schools and monitoring. The goal is not just to reopen, but also to keep the schools operating safely and help children recover their learning loss. We need to succeed in 2021, the golden jubilee year of Bangladesh's independence.

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Covid-19 and SDG 13: Countering Climate Change



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IN a "stag hunt" game, multiple hunters must cooperate each other to successfully encircle and hunt a stag. In the event that a hunter fails to cooperate and instead hunts a rabbit, it will no longer be possible for the remaining hunters to catch the stag. In such a case, the hunters will be better off abandoning any idea of cooperation and individually hunting rabbits for themselves. As long as the total meat obtained from the single stag is greater than the total meat obtained from all the rabbits, the hunters lose from failing to cooperate among themselves.

In many ways, global problems such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the climate change crisis, which demand greater international cooperation in order to be tackled successfully, may also be viewed as stag hunt games. Unless all countries of the world cooperate among themselves to deal with the "stags" of Covid-19 and climate change, we will ultimately be left with only "rabbits", if anything at all.

As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, Bangladesh is in a precarious position when it comes to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, which calls upon countries to "take urgent actions to combat climate change and its impacts". Up to 15 percent of the land area of the country could be inundated by 2050 due to the rise in sea level caused by climate change. Projections show that Bangladesh could lose around 1.1 percent of its GDP due to climate change during the period 2017-2041. According to data from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the total number of households affected by natural disasters increased from 550,555 in 2009 to 1,934,629 in 2014. This implies that as many as 44.36 percent of all households in the country were affected by natural disasters in 2014.

Although every natural disaster cannot be directly attributed to climate change, there is substantial evidence that anthropogenic climate change is responsible for the increase in the frequency, intensity and amount of heavy rainfall globally. Hence, the increase in the number of households affected by natural disasters in Bangladesh over the

years can be partly explained by climate change.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has caused a precipitous fall in economic activity leading to a decline in greenhouse gas emissions. Satellite data for Bangladesh showed that between February 1, 2020 and May 30, 2020, the average concentration of nitrogen dioxide fell by 40 percent and the average concentration of sulphur dioxide fell by 43 percent, compared to the same time period in 2019. Unfortunately, global greenhouse gas emission was estimated to fall by 6 percent in 2020, which is less than the target of a fall of 7.6 percent

continued to increase the number of natural disasters and amplify their deadliness. Thus, climate-vulnerable populations became more vulnerable due to Covid-19 and their ability to absorb shocks was compromised. On May 20, 2020, super cyclone Amphan hit 19 southern districts of Bangladesh, killing 26 people and affecting 2.6 million others. The cyclone affected more than 176,000 hectares of productive land and partly or completely damaged 261,135 houses and 440 kilometres of roads. It also damaged or destroyed 18,235 tubewells and 40,894 toilets, creating a water-sanitation-hygiene (WASH) crisis and



'In the midst of the pandemic, the effects of anthropogenic climate change has continued to increase the number of natural disasters and amplify their deadliness.'

PHOTO: REUTERS

required to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, as proposed by the Paris Agreement. This elucidates that countries are significantly off-track in terms of achieving SDG 13 and even radical reductions in economic activities may not be sufficient to prevent global warming.

It must be kept in mind that climate change is caused by the build-up of greenhouse gas emissions over time, and so the decrease in pollution due to lockdowns in 2020 would have only a limited effect without more reductions in emissions year-on-year. Thus, fundamentally different approaches are required to mitigate the drivers of climate change and to march forth on the road to a green recovery from Covid-19.

In the midst of the pandemic, the effects of anthropogenic climate change

compromising the ability of households to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Some estimates suggest that economic loss due to Amphan would be equivalent to at least Tk 11 billion (or approximately USD 130 million). Cyclones such as Amphan make it very difficult for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) such as Bangladesh to fight Covid-19 or achieve SDG 13.

While Bangladesh continues to repeatedly feel the brunt of anthropogenic climate change, the country itself has contributed very little to global warming. Recent research has shown that between 1990 and 2015, the richest one percent of the global population caused twice as much carbon emissions as the poorest 50 percent of the global population. Such extreme carbon inequality means that the ostentatious lifestyles of a small group

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of super-rich individuals in developed countries is causing anthropogenic climate change which is endangering the basic survival of millions of poor people in countries like Bangladesh. Unless a concerted global effort is made to address carbon inequality and chart a path of green recovery from Covid-19, we will simply be moving forward from one disaster to another in the years ahead.

In the book titled "Four Years of SDGs in Bangladesh: Measuring Progress and Charting the Path Forward", which I co-authored, we call for a number of steps that need to be taken urgently in order to implement SDG 13 in the context of Bangladesh. These steps include: i) scaling up adaptation measures to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change; ii) implementing national adaptation plans through participatory measures, and strengthening adaptation-related institutional arrangements; iii) increasing investment in renewable energy to make agriculture and manufacturing greener; iv) campaigning for greater funding of climate change adaptation measures and joining forces with other climate-vulnerable countries to persuade developed countries to fulfil their climate funding commitments; v) considering transboundary action and collaboration on mitigation and adaptation by setting up a separate fund amongst climate-vulnerable countries to address the impacts of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of people; and vi) increasing natural disaster preparedness by improving the efficiency of multi-hazard early warning systems.

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