

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY JANUARY 28, 2021, MAGH 14, 1427 BS

Bangladesh begins Covid-19 inoculation

It is a big step in the fight against the disease

THE vaccination campaign against Covid-19 in Bangladesh began on Wednesday. It is an incredibly important task and we wish the government the best of luck in this undertaking. Bangladesh now has 70 lakh vaccine doses at hand, of which 20 given as a gift from the Indian government. In total, Bangladesh has purchased 3 crore doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from Serum Institute of India, which will arrive in several phases. The government has targeted vaccinating 60 lakh people in the first month and another 50 lakh the following month. A pilot programme began yesterday, involving five public hospitals in Dhaka. Nurses, doctors, freedom fighters, media personnel and other frontline workers from different professional groups will receive the shots during the trial phase.

According to the director general of the DGHS, data available to the government shows that the vaccine is safe and its side effects are minimal. But in order to treat any side effects including severe allergic shocks, the DGHS has made arrangements to treat them. The vaccination guidelines for health workers said that in some cases, side effects like eye and face swelling, mild breathing issues, low blood pressure, nausea or unconsciousness might occur after vaccination. And health workers have been advised about what medical intervention to take in response. All recipients of the vaccine will have to stay at the vaccination centres for 15-30 minutes after the jab, and a medical team will also be present to tackle such adverse events in every vaccination centre.

In order to ensure that all recipients receive proper treatment in case of any side effect, and also instil people's confidence in the vaccine and our health sector's ability to provide the response needed to any side effect, we hope the authorities will take every precaution that they ought to. Health officials have said that side effects may arise if the purity of the vaccine is damaged due to improper storage. This means that all the vaccines that are in the country as well as the ones that will come in later must be stored in proper conditions. Faulty syringes and needles may also cause side effects, and therefore fresh syringes and needles must be made available at these hospitals at all times.

We understand that the vaccination programme will take some time, and it is best for the government to proceed keeping safety in mind first. However, because of the great challenges that are associated with such a largescale programme, we once again urge the government to plan ahead of time every step of the way.

Are primary students ready to go back to school?

The authorities must ensure proper safety measures to limit the spread of Covid-19

ACCORDING to a report published in this daily yesterday, in line with the resumption of secondary-level schools and colleges, the government is also planning to reopen primary schools and kindergartens. In fact, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) has already sent a guideline to all primary schools to prepare for reopening by February 4. This is despite the fact that on January 24, Education Minister Dipu Moni told reporters that the government will prioritise students from class 10 and 12 who need to prepare for their public exams. Her exact words were, "It is not possible to maintain health directives properly... as a result, there will be no scope to bring all students at a time at the educational institution."

We are quite perplexed by these contradictory statements from the authorities. If it is not possible to maintain health directives properly, then why are schools being reopened? After 10 months of lockdown, why have the authorities decided to throw primary students and their families into this uncertainty, once again, by barely giving them a week's notice regarding the resumption of classes? While the DPE has sent a guideline on reopening primary schools by February 4, the state minister for primary and mass education has said classes will begin on the first or second week of February, and that kindergarten schools could reopen any day—so which is it?

It is at least heartening to see that the DPE guideline has instructed schools to ensure opening and closure timings and distribution of mid-day meals in a way that avoids gatherings of students and guardians, and that they have especially stressed on the need for safe water and sanitation facilities and socially distanced classrooms, with students, teachers and members of staff being required to wear masks at all times. However, as well-meaning as these guidelines are, they are not easy to implement, especially since a vast majority of our schools are simply not spacious or well-funded enough to strictly maintain these guidelines. Although the authorities have mentioned the school-level improvement plan (SLIP) under the Primary Education Development Programme as a source of funding to ensure hygiene in educational institutions, it is unclear how soon and how easily these funds can be accessed.

The absence of our students from classrooms for such a prolonged period is, of course, a huge cause for concern, especially since there are longstanding issues of digital inequity that are excluding marginalised students from online learning. However, we also cannot push our children back into classrooms without a comprehensive plan on how to ensure that they are safe from Covid-19 in schools. We must keep in mind that while children are unlikely to be severely affected by the coronavirus, they are highly susceptible to becoming carriers of the virus. The last thing we need is another wave of Covid-19 being spread on the eve of vaccination, simply because we did not plan for this eventuality.



THE government has recently unveiled a national plan for vaccination against Covid-19. It has set the target of giving two vaccine doses to each of 130 million people to protect them from the deadly virus. According to the plan shared by the ruling Awami League on its verified Facebook page, the vaccine will be distributed in three phases divided into five stages based on priority. A total of about 1,72,81,000 people will be inoculated in the first two stages of the first phase. In the second phase, 1,72,80,000 people will be vaccinated, while the rest of the eligible persons will get their shots in the third and final phase. During the first stage of the first phase, a total of over 51,84,000 people including health workers and health assistants, freedom fighters, members of the law enforcing agencies and armed forces, government officials, frontline journalists, public representatives, officials and other employees of city corporations and municipalities as well as funeral workers will get the vaccine.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina virtually inaugurated a pilot vaccination drive on January 27 at Kurmitola General Hospital. The nationwide vaccination programme will kick off on February 7.

To start with, it looks very unusual that a government plan was unveiled by the ruling party through a Facebook page and not by any government agency and not through an official circular. The government is, of course, duty-bound to implement the agenda of the political party in power. This, however, does not mean that the party should act as an organ of the government. It is important that the activities of the government and the party in power do not get mixed up.

Several questions also come up: While the government was planning to start the immunisation programme in late January or early February, why did it wait so long to unveil plans for the programme now? Normally, it is easy to make a plan on paper but very difficult to implement it in practice. Have they done all the homework necessary for launching the programme?

There are several issues that need to be taken into consideration. First, it is gratifying to note that, as per a declaration of the prime minister in parliament on January 27, the priority

list also includes a vulnerable group consisting of elderly people and those with poor immunity or suffering from serious chronic diseases. While the government may already have in possession a list of the other people in the priority list, it is necessary to prepare a fresh list of the vulnerable group on an emergency basis.

Second, it is believed that a large number of the population suffered from Covid-19 without showing any symptom

Fourth, a complicated process has been developed for registration for vaccines by the general public. For registration, all citizens will first need to download an app on their mobile phones from Google's Play Store or Apple's App Store. They can also get registered on a website from any device. They will need to provide necessary information such as NID number, date of birth and mobile phone number. They will also need to provide health information such

It is important that the whole programme proceeds according to a set procedure and without any political or bureaucratic interference.



The first consignment of 50 lakh vaccine doses purchased from the Serum Institute of India arrived in Dhaka on January 25, 2020. More consignments will follow in the coming months.

PHOTO: STAR

and without their knowledge, as they did not go for testing. They may have antibodies of the virus present in their blood. Will they be vaccinated without any antibody test? Moreover, the policy on inoculation of confirmed Covid-19 patients has not been made clear yet.

Third, at the vaccination centres, there may be some people suffering from asymptomatic cases of Covid-19 and they may spread the virus without their knowledge. What precautions will be taken to protect the healthy people at vaccination centres from possible infections by asymptomatic carriers? It is expected that everyone will wear masks and maintain physical distancing at the centres. It is also necessary to disinfect every chair and piece of furniture after use so that no one gets infected. It is equally essential to maintain a proper hygienic condition and clinical cleanliness there. The vulnerable group, as mentioned above, needs special care during vaccination. It would be advisable to vaccinate them at their houses, if possible, for their safety.

as if they are suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer or kidney complications, or if they have been infected by the coronavirus. They will be required to confirm if they were involved in the Covid-19 fight directly. The authorities will then choose the vaccination centre for a citizen based on his/her current address. Once the process is completed, the citizen will get an SMS confirming the registration.

The applicant can then download the registration card anytime with a one-time password sent to his/her phone. This card must be shown to the authorities while taking the shot. To keep a record of immunisation, it is suggested that this card is sealed and signed with dates by an authorised person while the citizen receives each dose of the vaccine. Those who will not be able to register online or through the app will need to visit a hospital for registration.

The problem is, the majority of the population is unfamiliar with online transactions of business, so the number of online registrations is also likely to

The case for a four-day workweek



NORDIC countries have earned a reputation for experimenting, and in many cases succeeding, in taking their societies beyond traditional economic systems, thereby driving them towards being progressive welfare states. In December 2019, the world was introduced to its first all-female coalition cabinet in Finland. At 34, one of the first items on Prime Minister Sanna Marin's wish list had been a plan to consider a four-day workweek for the Finnish.

As the youngest elected leader of the world, Ms Marin stated in January 2020 that a four-day workweek comprising six hours of work per day would allow the citizens to have a better work-life balance and subsequently to enhance their collective quality of life, shifting the focus from a productivity-based economy to one that augments a sustainable standard of living. In her words, "people deserve to spend more time with their families, loved ones, hobbies and other aspects of life, such as culture. This could be the next step for us in working life."

Given the urgent need to reimagine a post-pandemic world that prioritises public health as a macroeconomic necessity, this idea sounds progressive, purposeful and positive. Who wouldn't like a three-day weekend? Nevertheless, it is equally important to examine what the data indicates regarding such a model.

In November 2018, Perpetual Guardian, a New Zealand-based estate management firm, adopted a four-day workweek policy which made global headlines—while productivity, measured in terms of output per employee per unit of time, remained unchanged, other behavioural metrics saw a steep shift towards the right direction. The percentage increases across key human resource indicators such as work-life balance (24 percent), commitment levels (20 percent), leadership skills (22 percent) and a sense of empowerment (20 percent) indicated that the model enhanced the scope for a more motivated work culture, while simultaneously driving positive business growth.

Microsoft Japan conducted its own trial of a four-day workweek in August 2019. Some 2300 of its employees were given paid leave on Fridays for the month,

and the results were remarkable. In one month, productivity levels rose by 40 percent. Furthermore, Microsoft Japan also witnessed a fall in costs—paper usage went down by 59 percent, whereas electricity consumption reduced by 23 percent. Aiding this shortened workweek model were corporate encouragements to streamline meeting times, promote online collaborations and urge employees to coordinate on projects. The pandemic has enhanced the scope for similar trials across other organisations.

In December 2020, Unilever New Zealand announced that its employees would work four days a week and be paid for five as part of a yearlong trial. The prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, has also echoed similar sentiments regarding shortened

institutional precedence. And it is this very aspect that the prime ministers of New Zealand and Finland ask us to consider when considering a four-day workweek.

As Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz puts it, the obsession with GDP by political actors means that we tend to ignore the most important unit of the economy, more precisely, the average citizen or worker. Standards of living should not therefore be solely determined by the average income for a society driven by productivity. It is important, especially now, to focus on ensuring that the quality of life for general citizens is improved and continuously so. Some may ask, do shortened workdays actually benefit the average citizen? The answer is: we simply don't know yet.

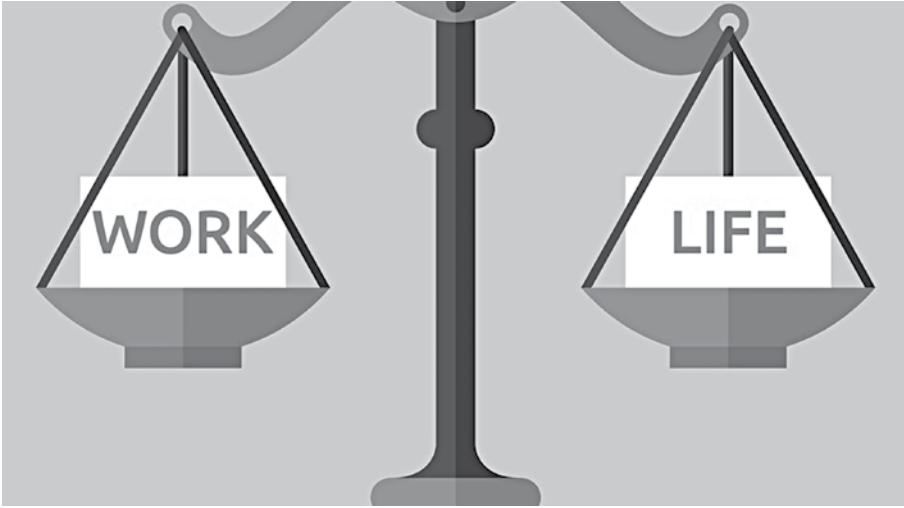


ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

workweeks. Falling long-run average costs (defined as economies of scale) is a primary consideration for firms engaging in this model, and with subsidiary effects on employees being overwhelmingly positive across participating firms, clusters of certain niche organisations are expected to institute similar shortened workweek schemes on a trial basis.

In addition to analysing quantitative metrics, it is equally important to recognise a deeper philosophical issue here. As the world moves forward, and traditionally agrarian nations such as Bangladesh take an even more integral part in the global political economy, should we, as stakeholders, focus on making societies richer rather than happier? If it is the latter, then the realisation of giving people more time with their families and prioritising welfare over profits or growth must take

For a country like Bangladesh, the challenge comes not across urban organisations such multinational corporations or tech companies, but rather in traditional service industries and low-wage activities such as the textiles industry. Think of it this way: if banks operated on a four-day basis, it would be nearly impossible to meet the public demand for financial services in the country. Or put on a more national scale: if factories reduced their operations by a day, there would be a complete mismatch of demand and supply considerations for global RMC exporters, leading to production being shifted away from Bangladesh. These are questions that are yet to be given thought to; perhaps the accentuation of the digital economy is the best place to start for us. However, across nations with low populations and tertiary economic foundations, such as

Finland, the idea of a four-day workweek should indeed be encouraged and tested further—if the model succeeds, it can be given a trial run at least across major corporations in developing economies such as Bangladesh.

And beyond all this, there is then the issue of environmental protection. It is no secret that unfettered production and continuous abuse of our collective natural resources is a direct by-product of our obsession with profitability. Reducing working hours has already proven to be a strong driver of increasing productivity and employee wellness, but equally importantly, it enhances the scope for sustainable business models which can tangibly contribute towards reducing carbon emissions in line with the goals set forth by the Paris Agreement.

In all probability, this may sound utopian or too good to be true, yet it is my humble opinion that we as societies have forgotten to prioritise citizens' well-being and rather shifted our focus towards achieving numbers that make the financial statements of our national economies look good on paper. A classic example of this is how a country like Bangladesh, even with its impressive 7 to 8 percent growth rates, is witnessing its highest level of income inequality in its independent history—this cannot, and must not, be the sole indicator of progress.

As remote working becomes a norm and global unemployment levels hit concerning numbers, it is the obligation of global leaders to rethink mechanisms that prioritise public welfare. As we move forward, we are certain to witness a combination of in-person and remote work, particularly for those in the tertiary industry, and the pandemic has taught us the importance of prioritising the wellbeing of both workers and the environment as organisational necessities.

There are more challenges to a four-day workweek than answers at this point in time. But it may be worthwhile for certain leading companies, especially large corporations which unquestionably must bear the brunt for pushing the world towards a climate crisis, to experiment in enhancing workers' welfare through such schemes. And one looks with hope and anticipation as to what effects a four-day workweek has on the citizens of Finland or New Zealand, if their governments do indeed decide to move forward with this agenda on an institutional scale.

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a Toronto-based banking professional. Email: aftab.ahmed@alum.utoronto.ca