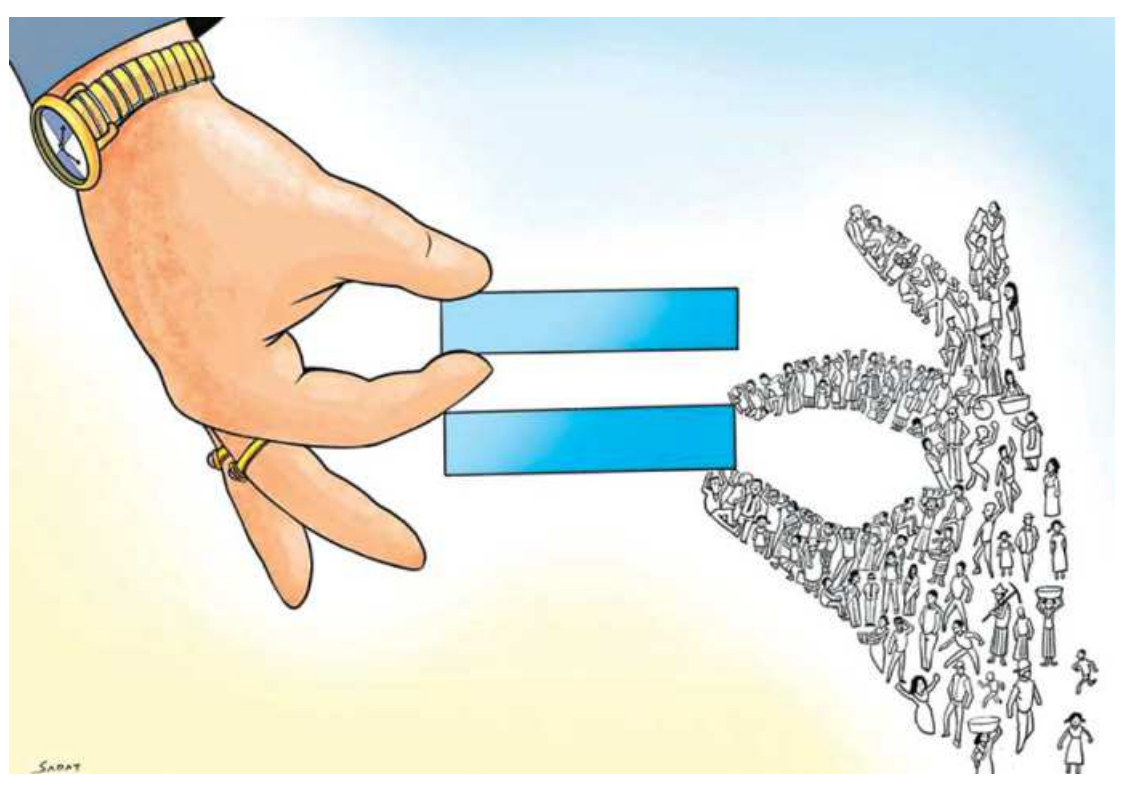


FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

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SDGs: Where are we in achieving them?



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The Covid-19 crisis necessitates a new roadmap for humanity. No other previous crisis caused as much devastation and reversals in gains in development since the 1990s. The pandemic inflicted more damage in just three weeks compared to what others did in more than three years, highlighting the importance of bringing a qualitative change in people's lives in terms of good health, quality education, decent work, gender equality, sustainable cities and infrastructure and strong institutions. These are part of 17 interlinked global goals, known as sustainable development goals (SDGs, set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030).

The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened the pre-existing fault-lines in Bangladesh with unprecedented differentiated impacts on lives and livelihoods. The fallouts are fragmenting intermediate classes, with emergence of many new poor, unemployed and working poor, belying the progresses

conditions are met, the trajectory will not be discriminatory but will lead to relatively low inequality. If such is not the case, the economy will traverse on a path of extremely discriminatory K-shaped recovery.

SDG 1: END POVERTY

Nasima came to Dhaka from Kurigram and recently started working in the garment industry. She earns just a fraction over the minimum wage of Tk 8,000, which only pays for a shabby living. When the lockdown was enforced, her factory closed down without paying her dues. With limited savings, she had no choice but to return to work as the garments industry recommenced operations amidst the lockdown.

Reduction in poverty has slowed down to 1.2 percentage points during the period of 2010-2016 from 1.7 percentage points during 2005-2010. According to Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Covid-19 has added 18.4 million to the existing poor. This addition and the slow pace of poverty reduction have become a major challenge to end poverty in all its form by 2030.

required, according to UN Food and Agriculture Organization, about 31.5 percent of the population in Bangladesh remains moderately or severely food-insecure. Besides, the prevalence of stunting among children younger than five years of age is 30.8 percent, indicating a problem of chronic malnutrition. Bangladesh ranked 75th

According to the Water Aid, four million people—one in every seven—do not have access to clean water while over 50 percent of the population—over 85 million—does not have access to basic sanitation, with 2,000 children under five dying from diarrhoea caused by dirty water and poor toilets.

among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020—revealing serious hunger problems.

SDG 3: HEALTHY LIVES AND WELL-BEING

In March, Salma, a nurse at a private hospital in Narayanganj, received her first Covid-positive patient. At the time, she had no clue about the patient's actual diagnosis because of a lack of centrally-administered procedural training on identifying and treating Covid patients. In the next few weeks Salma found that the hospital was completely overwhelmed with a need for protective gears (PPE), ventilators and other equipment, and was compelled to refuse new patients. Soon, many of the hospital staff including doctors and nurses were found to be infected.

Our entire healthcare system is overburdened, as the number of hospital beds is insufficient for regular patients. Bangladesh's doctor-to-patient ratio is 5.81 per 10,000 people, the second-lowest in South Asia. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), about 39.8 percent of women of reproductive ages suffer from anaemia, and 50 percent of women have chronic energy deficiency, causing low productivity, warranting a universal healthcare.

SDG 4: INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION

Sabuj, a public university student, is from a remote area of Netrokona. When the pandemic started, he was compelled to return home. He is unable attend online classes because of poor internet connectivity.

Inequality between the number of rich and poor students, mostly in tertiary

level of education, is high. According to the World Bank, 65 percent of total public university students are represented by the 20 percent richest class while poorest 20 percent constitute only 5 percent. Online education is only available to the students living in the capital and in other metropolitan areas. Furthermore, the disparity in literacy rate between males (73 percent) and females (68.9 percent) contributes to a lower average salary of female workers than their male counterparts, which is demotivating many female workers to work outside of their houses.

SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Shirin runs her own catering business which delivers office lunches on a contractual basis. At the onset of the pandemic, Shirin encountered a termination of all her contracts as offices closed without further notice. For months on end, the income loss, and subsequent loss of well-being, led to more frequent squabbles and increased hostility with her husband, who often resorted to physical violence.

According to Brac, about 58 percent of women, who reported increased violence, said that it was due to the pandemic-intensified poverty. The women labour dominated RMG sector is facing uncertainty, which is resulting in layoffs and eventually may increase domestic violence, early marriage, immature pregnancy and neonatal deaths.

SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Like Shahana in Mohammadpur Beribadh slum, Suruj Mia and his family have to share a toilet and a tube-well with at least 10 other families. They have no facility of clean drinking water and sanitation.

According to the Water Aid, four million people—one in every seven—do not have access to clean water while over 50 percent of the population—over 85 million—does not have access to basic sanitation, with 2,000 children under five dying from diarrhoea caused by dirty water and poor toilets. Frequent seasonal flooding, like the one witnessed last year, contaminates water sources, leaving millions of people with terrible sanitary conditions while arsenic contamination across the country puts over 20 million people at risk each year.

SDG 7: ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, SUSTAINABLE AND MODERN ENERGY

Bokul works as an electric technician in a remote village in Barguna. He encourages households to install solar panels.

Access to electricity has not grown at the same pace with electricity generation. 22 percent of rural areas are still without electricity. Electricity generation increased sharply in the last decade, owing to fossil fuel, a stark contrast to the global

scenario where countries are dumping fossil fuels for renewable sources.

SDG 8: INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DECENT WORK

Waliul Haque had been working in the management of an insurance company in Dhaka for seven years. Waliul was laid off. Now he is using ride sharing apps to make his daily living—and as a result he is underemployment compared to his previous workplace.

The precarity of youth began long before the virus outbreak, as the youth unemployment rate between the ages of 14 and 24 was 12.3 percent. The ILO-World Bank estimates that about 26.2 percent of the young are not in employment, education, and training (NEET), which is far worse than the neighbouring countries. The limited employment opportunity is holding back the rate of reduction in poverty. The unemployment rate in 2016-2017 was 4.2 percent. Covid-19 could have caused 1.1 million to 1.7 million youth to become unemployed, according to a report by the ILO and the Asian Development Bank. Besides, real wage growth has decreased over time, resulting in drastic consequences for the country's workers, implying lesser reduction in poverty and rise in inequality.

SDG 9: RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE, INDUSTRIALISATION AND INNOVATION

Two newly built culverts were giving a lot of hope to Alam, a farmer living in a village in Tangail. The frustration of Alam and other villagers only increased as the culvert had no connecting roads.

Bangladesh is the worst performer among four South Asian nations in providing logistics support as per the Emerging Markets Logistics Index 2020. The cost of constructing a one km road is between USD 2.5-11.9 million in Bangladesh, whereas in India it is between USD 35,900-45,600, and USD 85,400 in Vietnam. Besides, the entire manufacturing process must undergo drastic makeovers with a balance between domestic consumption and export orientation. Capabilities can be enhanced through diversification, productivity augmentation, technological advancements and increased competitiveness.

SDG 10: REDUCING INEQUALITIES

Dipak sells soft drinks outside a public school in Siddeswari. As schools remain closed, he found himself at a loss. The income share of the mid 50 percent of the population changed negligibly. The share of the bottom 40 percent decreased by 28.40 percent between 1985 and 2016, whilst that acquired by the top 10 percent rose by 21.30 percent, along with a 17.3 percent increase in the wealth of the super-rich.



A wealthy Gulshan resident has guaranteed availability of freshwater while the poor living in slums not only struggle to find appropriate source of quality water but also pay more compared to the well-off.

achieved since the 1990s.

The question is what kind of recovery is needed to achieve the SDGs? The determinants of recovery depend on the policies adopted by a government. Two different routes of recovery will be visible if a government adopts active restraint measures or if it ordains active inaction or business as usual measures. In the framework of active restraint, four major conditions are assumed. These include: presence of public goods provision, redistributive policies and actions, macro-financial interventions and structural policy reforms. If these

SDG 2: END HUNGER

With a family of five, Shahana—a part-time domestic help for three households—lives in the Mohammadpur Beribadh slum, in a dingy small room on a floor space shared by 13 other families. During the pandemic, over concerns of contagion, two of the households dismissed her services, curtailing her income to less than one-third. Shahana would run out of options to feed her family, apart from the periodic relief packages, if she was lucky.

Even though food production in the country is well above the minimum