

Vaccination in rural areas and small towns need a boost

Mass awareness and easy registration are a must

THE Covid-19 inoculation drive has been fairly successful in the major cities with more and more people registering for the vaccine and getting the dates for inoculation quite quickly. The progress in the small towns and rural areas, however, has not been very encouraging. Even though the government has ensured that the vaccine is available in these areas, people are not coming to the centres. Two main barriers seem to be in the way—lack of access to online registration and lack of awareness regarding why people need to get vaccinated.

In small towns and rural areas, many people do not have access to Internet services or simply have no idea how to register online. According to a report by this paper, among the eight divisions, the lowest number of people vaccinated till Tuesday was in Barishal with only 63,659 doses used from the allocated 3.48 doses. Meanwhile, in Dhaka, the highest number of people vaccinated was recorded—around 3.75 lakh. The Barishal divisional health director has cited slow Internet, lack of communication and lack of awareness as reasons behind the low number of people registering. This is the case in many other areas too.

But even in centres where there is an arrangement for on-the-spot registration, the expected number of people are not turning up. It is great that in some areas, the government is arranging door-to-door registration services conducted by health workers, which should significantly increase the registration numbers. The biggest hurdle, however, is gaining people's interest and trust in the vaccine. In areas where infection rates are low, people think that the pandemic is over and there is no reason to be vaccinated. Others are suspicious of the vaccine feeding into the misinformation and negative propaganda in social media or other informal information channels. It is unfortunate that the government did not think of these bottlenecks before the inoculation started. But now that we know where the problems are, we must act very fast as it is crucial to get everyone vaccinated within a certain period to ensure that everyone is safe.

People all over the country have to be made aware that the pandemic is *not* over, that infections may rise again if health guidelines are flouted, that the virus can spread very fast and cause deaths, and that it is crucial that everyone gets vaccinated so that the pandemic is kept at bay. The online registration has worked well in the cities because there are more people who are educated and have access to Internet. Others can get Internet services from shops. But this is not the case in rural areas or even small towns.

The government must take immediate steps to ensure access to online registration either by ramping up the door-to-door services or having all vaccination centres ready to do on-the-spot registration. Provisions also have to be made for those who do not possess either NID numbers or birth certificates to be registered for inoculation. As with other national immunisation programmes, the Covid-19 vaccine must be available to everyone.

A clean city with more job opportunities?

A very good proposition for Dhaka

ACCORDING to a study by Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), a worldwide alliance working for a global shift towards environmental justice, over 6,000 new jobs can be created in Dhaka if 80 percent of recyclable and organic material in its waste stream can be recovered. The study has found that by investing in zero-waste programmes, cities can not only reduce pollution and improve community health, but can also create a good number of green jobs. Jobs can be created through various waste management strategies such as repair and reuse, recycling, composting, incineration and landfill. While reusing can create over 200 times as many jobs as landfills and incinerators, recycling can create around 70 times the number of jobs, and re-manufacturing can create almost 30 times as many jobs as landfills and incinerators. The study findings are, indeed, very encouraging.

Waste management is one of the most pressing issues that Dhaka has been facing for decades as our city authorities could not yet develop an environment-friendly, sustainable waste management system. The city has been using two landfills (both of them have almost reached their full capacity) under two city corporations to dump all kinds of waste, including medical waste and e-waste. Moreover, there is hardly any formal mechanism to recycle and reuse the waste materials dumped there. Reportedly, around 6,250 tonnes of garbage are produced in both city corporations every day, a large amount of which goes into open drains, canals and water bodies because of the incapacity of the corporations to collect them.

This newspaper has published several research-based reports on the waste management problems of Dhaka and many other divisional cities to draw the attention of the authorities to establish an efficient waste management strategy. Unfortunately, we are yet to see any visible change in the system. What is most unfortunate is that we still do not have a waste management policy without which an organised waste management system cannot be established.

However, the GAIA study findings have given us hope by showing us how we can save our environment and create job opportunities for people at the same time. Already there is an organisation named ESDO (Environment and Social Development Organisation) which has taken an initiative to build a "zero-waste community" in Dhaka, and by now has created job opportunities for 60 waste collectors, which is very heartening. We hope our two city corporations will take note of the above development and invest in a waste management system that is sustainable and good for our economy.

As Bangladesh marches forward, what more can we do?



RAHEL AHMED

BD has witnessed steep economic growth since its independence, especially in the last two decades, which has invariably resulted in our rising prosperity. But

while we should continue to tune up and build on the engines that are driving this growth, we should also consider the speed bumps that lie ahead.

The economic growth we have experienced over the past decade or so has enabled our consumers to consume more and enjoy better standards of living. We have had a strong consumerist culture created over the same period, and digitisation has only accelerated that. After the Covid-19 outbreak, we have witnessed a surge in e-commerce which has crossed urban boundaries and is now sweeping all across the country. Modern logistics companies who cater to e-commerce players primarily have achieved countrywide network coverage to support customers' needs and are still expanding further towards the interior. The EMI (equated monthly installment) culture has caught on amongst urban young professionals and is being fuelled by their means meeting the ends. Beyond the urban and into the semi-urban and rural areas, we can also see the surge of people going for white goods and consumables. It could only be possible as an impact of their overall income being elevated.

I must note here that a vast majority of producers at the rural level (peasants and growers of food) are still facing an increased challenge of not being given their full dues due to the layers in our supply chain where middlemen are making the gains. This is one challenge that needs to be tackled over the years to come. The ongoing digitisation can be a long-term solution to this as it will essentially enable the growers to get their proper dues through connecting them directly to the customers.

Economic growth also is a proven driver in reducing absolute poverty and enabling a rise in life expectancy. In our case, both have happened. With higher output and positive economic growth, firms tend to employ more workers creating more employment. That has happened in our case, albeit not at the pace we had envisaged. This is another area that needs to be closely looked at by the relevant policymakers, along with actions required to improve the scenario. At the same time, I see a rise of entrepreneurs across the country, in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Young minds are driven towards becoming entrepreneurs with the purpose of earning better livelihoods.

There is another issue that also needs to be scrutinised. Economic growth ideally creates higher tax revenues, and there is less need for spending money on benefits such as unemployment allowance. Economic

growth helps in reducing government borrowing. It also plays a role in reducing debt-to-GDP ratios. Unfortunately, one of the major institutional weaknesses that we have is the tax net and revenue earning for the government. Much effort has gone into improving revenue generation, but it seems that major reforms and a change of mindset among the masses would be required to address this situation.

Higher tax revenues would enable the

years that with higher economic growth, a society can devote more resources to promoting recycling and the use of renewable resources—which, in our case, is also visible despite all the other limitations that we have. The state is also playing a major role here by setting longer-term SDGs and through regular monitoring of those at different levels. We are seeing the change of outlook of entrepreneurs all around the country who are increasingly

Covid-19 vaccine. I see it as an outcome of economic development.

The economic development that has come with our economic growth has not only improved the lifestyle of a large portion of the population working in agriculture/subsistence farming, but has also diverted the economy with people being able to work in services sector, manufacturing and having a greater choice of lifestyles.

Our economic development has also come with costs. One of the detrimental effects that we have experienced is increased pollution and congestion. At the same time, this has increased unequal distribution of wealth and income. As evidenced in history, growth has primarily benefitted the richest in society. It would perhaps be wrong to state that it has only made the rich richer, but the inequality has given stress to certain socio-economic behaviours of the demography. Corruption has become embedded within different processes and that has also been one enduring characteristic of most developed economies. The intention to curb corruption is what matters, and this is where the state requires to take stern steps before it is too late. Financial scams and other relevant instances must be governed with full attention. We have to take lessons from the past and introduce strong mechanisms of accountability that can offer a long-term solution to this problem.

We must also bear in mind that many developing economies had to forego a couple of decades to have the right norms institutionalised. We are better off than most other South Asian economies with respect to most of the social indexes that matter, and this gives me hope.

To sum up, our robust economic growth has directly and significantly facilitated our economic development. Today, we have an expanded middle class with higher demand to consume; our social index in most of the count has improved; and the private sector has been resilient with consistent growth momentum where the state played a prudent role in providing them with the right infrastructural support given the inherent limitations to combat with. Our young economy with a population of more than 170 million people—consisting of a huge demographic dividend—is a huge asset which must be nurtured and invested in.

We have seen Boston Consulting Group forecasting that middle and upper-middle classes of consumers shall soon attract global retail chains to step in, and that now seems imminent. Where we require to focus more and invest more time and energy is in increasing governance standards across all verticals, and we need to ensure that the benefits are equally distributed amongst all. We have many challenges and a long way to go, but with the right guidance and policy support, this is very much possible. This will ensure the fitness of our growth momentum and take the country to the next level of prosperity.

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IMAGE: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

government to spend more on public services such as healthcare and education. This can enable higher living standards, such as increased life expectancy, higher literacy rate, and a greater understanding of civic and political issues. Despite all the odds and limited tax revenue generation, the government has managed to curb illiteracy significantly, and also to spread basic healthcare to the innermost parts of the country. The resilient private sector is also doing its part by enabling the expansion of the middle class and improving their purchasing power, which is evident in the steady increase in per capita GDP.

It is obvious from examples over the

investing in green facilities. These conversions to green facilities may not have a direct revenue impact vis-à-vis the higher capital expenditure that one needs to incur, but many entrepreneurs are still doing it because they have the capacity and mindset to do so.

High economic growth also leads to increased profitability for firms, enabling more spending on research and development. Also, sustained economic growth increases confidence and encourages firms to take risks and innovate. Today, we are expecting our local pharmaceutical companies to achieve success in their declared quest to successfully launch a home-grown

Time for a radical rethinking of our education system



ARAF MOMEN AKA

IN order to ensure a sufficient pool of qualified people in a nation, it is necessary to have an up-to-date education system that is on a par with the demands of the global economy. Yet, the

fact is that Bangladesh has been lagging behind other comparable countries in terms of education quality. In fact, the Global Knowledge Index (GKI) of 2020, prepared by the UNDP and Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, ranked Bangladesh at 112th out of 138 countries. We were placed behind Pakistan (111th) and Nepal (110th), with India topping the list in South Asia holding the 75th place.

However, we must not forget the strides Bangladesh has made in education. As of 2016, according to World Bank, primary school enrolment rates reached 97.6 percent and completion rates reached 79.6 percent. NGOs like BRAC and USAID have made it possible to teach children in remote areas under the national curriculum. Additionally, there is now proper gender parity in schools and colleges, both in cases of male-to-female ratios of students and teachers. The SSC enrolments of girls jumped from 39 percent in 1998 to 67 percent in 2017. There are enough separate classrooms for students for the teacher-student ratio to fall to 1:30 in 2018, down from 1:63 in 1990, making it easier for teachers to properly focus on the students assigned to their classes.

All these accomplishments, however, are overshadowed by the fact that the education that students receive is worth little in terms of quality.

The majority of Bangladeshi students are enrolled in public educational institutions, whether at pre-primary,

primary, secondary, higher secondary or tertiary levels. Private educational institutions—the ones that do not follow the curricula set by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), like English-medium schools and private universities—are beyond reach for a large portion of the households.

Let us start with the problems of primary and secondary schools. While student enrolment rates at this level are high, dropout rates are also high, standing at 36 percent in 2019 for secondary-level students, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics (BANBEIS). In 2018, BANBEIS also pointed out that 40.19 percent of the female students and 36.01 percent of the male students enrolled in secondary schools had dropped out. Besides, forceful private tutoring where students have no other choice but to separately join private tutoring sessions conducted by schoolteachers has been rampant. Teachers do not properly teach classes in schools, and the national curriculum heavily relies on memorisation rather than critical thinking, on low-quality teaching and school management practices, etc.

At an age when the children are supposed to develop their critical thinking abilities, they are limited to crowded classrooms where critical thinking is neither encouraged nor rewarded. And many remain neglected when it comes to their education and personal well-being, with little access to early childhood development programmes.

In comparison, public education systems in countries like Sweden, ranked 4th by the GKI 2020, start the process of children's learning from ages 1.5-2 years, according to Daily Scandinavian. Discussions are conducted about the contents of children's education programmes among students aged 7-10; English is taught from the third grade through songs and other media outlets, instead of putting any emphasis

whatsoever on grammar and cramming; numerical marks of tests are not used up until the sixth grade to discourage unhealthy competition; special attention is given to students with special needs like Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and other mental ailments along with students having physical disabilities, etc.

In our country, the education problem does not end at the primary and secondary levels, however. The problems continue up to the higher secondary and even tertiary levels of education.

There is little room for pursuit of quality, neither in the questionable methods followed by the HSC and SSC curricula, nor in the way the curricula require one to automatically assign home economics to girls and agricultural management to boys. Developing the students' critical faculties is hardly encouraged. Meanwhile, tertiary-level educational institutions like universities and degree colleges suffer from myriad problems including session jams. Teacher-student interaction in often one-sided, where inputs from the latter are often brushed aside while that of the former almost always go unquestioned.

In 2016, UNESCO reported that the gross enrolment rate of Bangladeshi students in Tertiary Educational Institutions (TEIs) is a mere 16 percent, far lower than that of Sri Lanka (19 percent) and India (27 percent). Moreover, the students in tertiary colleges under the National University are often ignored by the policymakers and considered "subpar" by employers and the general public alike. Worse, the unemployment rate among university graduates was just 39 percent in 2019, according to Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). Worse still, 46 percent of the graduates from National University take at least 3 years to find a job, according to World Bank. If hard-earned graduate degrees mean so little when it comes to employment, what's the point of putting so much stress on

achieving that degree?

Furthermore, despite having a large pool of PhD qualified academics, the general research culture is quite lacklustre, thanks in large part to the lack of funds and a proper research environment. As a consequence, Bangladesh's research output is far smaller than those of other South Asian countries, especially India and Pakistan.

To sum up the situation faced by TEI students, not only do they graduate later than they are supposed to, they are also getting education that neither helps them acquire proper skills nor does it guarantee employment. More so, students have little power on how and what they will be taught, and feedback is often overlooked by faculty members. Finally, research initiatives do not receive much support from the government, regardless of how badly we need it, thus leaving very little incentives for research work to be done.

And it does not help either that the budget allocated for the education sector was a mere 11.68 percent of the national budget in FY 2020-21. The amount allocated was Tk 61,118 crore, a meagre 2.1 percent of our national GDP, whereas UNESCO recommends a minimum of 6 percent of GDP to be spent on the education sector. The allocated budget for education seems to be falling every year, instead of rising, as has been recommended. Private education could offer an alternative under such circumstances, but it is often too far out of reach for a lot of students.

It does not bode well for us that we are deemed to be in the 112th position out of 138 nations when it comes to the quality of education. Adequate budget allocations as well as proper reforms to make our education sector worthy of the challenges of the 21st century are very much needed. Otherwise, we cannot tackle the continued erosion of our education system.

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