

## Mugda hospital dogged by understaffing, resources shortage

Govt must provide necessary support

IT is a cause of great concern that in the midst of the second wave of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, one of the healthcare institutions that has stood out in providing services throughout the pandemic, the Mugda General Hospital, is understaffed and also suffering from a lack of necessary resources. A report published in this daily yesterday showed how it is taking longer than usual for the hospital to deliver CT scans of Covid-19 patients due to a lack of staff in the relevant department. It also detailed how Mugda is operating way over its capacity of 329 beds and 19 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients, with at least 15 doctors and an unknown number of nurses and other staff currently down with the virus themselves.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic last year, Mugda Hospital has been at the forefront of providing services to affected patients. Given that this hospital has been dedicated to treating coronavirus patients and knew first-hand the challenges of the first wave, one wonders why it did not receive more support and resources from the authorities over the past year. There are so many patients on the waitlist for ICU beds that those arriving in ambulances are being turned away. And because of the hospital lacking enough oxygen cylinders, patients coming into the emergency ward are being asked to sign a bond stating that they would not seek oxygen. We all had anticipated the second wave for quite some time and seen hospitals like Mugda face these challenges during the first wave. Why then have no steps been taken to make provisions for sufficient beds, ICUs and oxygen cylinders?

There is also the saddening reason behind the hospital lacking manpower: staff members being infected by the virus. According to Mugda staff, the current protocol of working for two weeks and quarantining for two weeks is not possible to follow due to the lack of manpower. Has the health ministry suggested any alternative plan for such instances? Are the healthcare workers being provided with adequate PPEs and the support they need to quarantine when required? It is a shame that the people tasked with the responsibility of working on the frontlines and saving lives are not being able to adequately protect themselves.

We believe it is imperative for the concerned authorities to act quickly in order to ensure that Mugda—and other public hospitals treating Covid-19 patients—have enough resources and staff members at all times to successfully tackle the second wave of the virus. The number of beds and ICUs must be increased, and we must be able to procure more oxygen cylinders for critical patients. The government should also urgently ensure that healthcare workers treating Covid-19 patients are on the priority list for the second dose of Covid-19 vaccines.

## Acute water crisis in Barind region

Depletion of groundwater across the country must be tackled urgently

ACCORDING to a report in this daily yesterday, people in the Barind region of the country are facing an acute shortage of water, including drinking water, due to depleting groundwater levels. Many paddy farmers spoke to *The Daily Star* of being forced to diversify to less water-intensive crops or converting their croplands into ponds and brick kilns, in a region where this essential resource is becoming increasingly dear.

Experts say this is a result of the abuse of existing groundwater levels, which are mostly being extracted for paddy farming, rice mill operations and other industrial purposes, leaving the locals including small paddy farmers high and dry. The picture painted in the report is disconcerting, with farmers expressing their anger over having to pay high prices of water for their crops from private deep tube-wells, while the canal they have been installed next to—meant for supplying water from the Padma to nearby agricultural fields—runs dry. Data from the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority suggests that around 70 percent of the region's annual groundwater extraction of 13,710 million cubic metres is done by unregulated private deep tube-wells—enough to fill up around 18 lakh ponds that are each two metres deep and cover one bigha.

However, the abuse of groundwater for farming and industrial purposes is an issue that affects not just the Barind region, but the entire country. Bangladesh is the world's fourth largest rice-producing country, and groundwater provides 75 percent of the water needed for rice irrigation. An estimated 3,000 litres of water are required to produce just one kilogram of Boro rice, and this estimate doesn't even count the water being used up in the rice mills. It is thus abundantly clear that unless steps are taken urgently, thousands of farmers and rural communities across the country will suffer deeply from the lack of adequate levels of groundwater.

The right to water of every citizen of this country is set out in the Bangladesh Water Act 2013 and Bangladesh Water Rules 2018, and the government should ensure that these laws are enforced and water resources are secured and regulated effectively. In this regard, the Water Resources Planning Organisation (WARPO) has taken up ambitious plans to map surface and underground water resources across the country, in order to identify safe withdrawal limits of groundwater and regulate water use. This water governance project is a step in the right direction, and the government must ensure that it is implemented efficiently and transparently. At the same time, it must also take steps against industries that are abusing shared water resources, and encourage farmers to move towards less water-intensive crops in regions where groundwater requires preserving.

# Pursuing new approaches to deliver quality education is key

LEARNING LOSS



ZAHID HUSSAIN

IN-PERSON schooling in Bangladesh has remained shut since March 2020. Children have already lost a full year, equivalent to 0.6 learning-adjusted years of schooling based on the learning gap implied by the World Bank (WB) in its Human Capital Index (2020) for Bangladesh. The longer they are out of the formal schooling system, the greater will be the erosion of the foundational skills they had acquired, not to speak of what they would have added to those if the school year were not lost.

Education is generally associated with higher productivity which in turn translates into higher earnings. The science of brain development shows that the productivity effects depend on learning inside and outside of the formal schooling system. However, formal education is critical at early stages because it imparts structured and systematic form of learning. The loss in schooling caused by the pandemic is, therefore, likely to cause loss of lifetime earnings.

What can we guess about the size of lifetime earnings lost already? The WB provided estimates of these losses in South Asia in its latest South Asia Economic Focus report. The estimates for the region provide an anchor for sensing losses in individual countries.

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WB estimates that the typical student can expect to lose as much as USD 445 annually because of lost schooling and learning, equivalent to Tk 1900 per month in the Bangladesh context. This is higher than Bangladesh's lower national poverty line and the loss has not stopped yet. The loss already incurred is indeed high if you look at it from the point of view of poor and non-poor low-income families.

Schools not only inculcate life skills but also cater to additional needs, such as food and psycho-social support. So, the loss in earnings could be thought of as just the pecuniary loss that vastly underestimates the total loss comprising both pecuniary and non-pecuniary losses.

The prospect of reopening school has

plummeted following an exponential resurgence of the virus recently. The education system cannot function without disruption until the state of the virus spread curve is flat enough to be safe for children and teachers to be in school. A sustainable flattening of the virus spread curve can happen only after we achieve herd immunity through vaccination or infection. The latter is only an option that will befall us with completely uncertain

in low-income families are the least likely to access remote learning, monitored on their learning loss, have delays to their schools reopening, and to attend schools.

According to the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) household survey done over phone between November and December 2020, only 21 percent of students participated in any form of online education (via TV, internet, etc.) since the pandemic. The

based learning.

These efforts were more common, but not limited, among high-income countries and in environments where resources were already available. More than two-thirds of countries fully or partially reopened their schools. But the experience is mixed. In most of Germany, students have been back in school since May, albeit on a part-time basis with reduced class sizes to enable social distancing. The younger students ignored the latter anyway. In Thailand, students go to the bathroom to wash hands before entering the socially distanced classroom. Thailand did not have domestic infection for more than five weeks. In Israel, students were back to school very quickly, but a heat wave prompted the government to waive mask wearing. This caused big outbreaks in schools and a lot of schools shut down.

The key lessons from these experiences are to listen to the health experts and avoid acting on whims. Parents, schools, and entire education systems will need to play new roles to support student learning as the situation remains in flux. Research conducted by more than 220 professors affiliated with the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and innovations from J-PAL's partners provide insights into supporting immediate and long-term goals for educating children.

Many parents or caregivers, especially with young children, have taken on new roles to help with at-home learning. Many countries have used SMS, phone calls, and other widely accessible, affordable, and low-technology methods of information delivery to support caregivers and remote education efforts. Governments and NGOs have been experimenting with radio and TV to support parents and augment student learning in areas where internet access is limited. The Indian NGO Pratham collaborated with the Bihar state government and a television channel to produce 10 hours of learning programming per week.

Finding new and innovative ways to deliver quality education can give us all a sense of hope. If the international education community can come together and learn from each other about new ways of providing quality education, it will emerge better equipped to help students thrive in a rapidly changing world. We were worried about learning poverty before the pandemic and about the inequality in learning opportunities. The learning baseline has dropped, and inequality of education opportunities has increased.

The consequences of children missing out on essential academic and social-emotional learning, formative relationships with peers and adults, opportunities for play, and other developmental necessities could, individually and cumulatively, have a cataclysmic impact on the economic and social landscape by leaving a vast number of current and future generations behind.

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Children have lost a full year in terms of schooling, making it essential to ensure an alternative mode of delivering education with universal access.

FILE PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

consequences if all other options fail. The WB has projected that vaccination coverage in Bangladesh will not reach 70 percent before the end of 2022. Meanwhile, containing the spread of the virus would require diligent adherence to masking, social distancing and hygiene practices.

How do we manage to educate our children under such circumstances? Clearly, there is need for massive public interventions to ensure an alternative mode of delivering education with universal access. This is not just a question of increasing public spending on education, which is even lower than commonly perceived in Bangladesh. However, the quantity of spending alone is not necessarily going to correct the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The effectiveness of education spending is now more important than ever. Global evidence assimilated by the WB suggests that "for every 10 percent increase in per child spending, outcomes only improved by 0.8 percent, with the marginal effect higher at lower spending levels." Similar amounts of spending produce vastly different outcomes because of differences in the efficiencies and accountabilities in education systems.

The crisis offers an important reflection point for education leaders to explore new approaches for delivering quality education. Marginalised communities have suffered most education deprivation caused by the pandemic. Schoolchildren

participation was much lower in poor households (15 percent) compared with non-poor households (26 percent). The key reason (50 percent) for not participating was the unavailability of online class activities. Lack of access to internet and smart devices was also important (23 percent). Of those who had access, only 28.6 percent felt that online or TV classes are effective.

The measures taken by the government, such as promotion without examination, have largely been directed at protecting the transition of students within the education system with little or no immediate consequence for education outcomes. Anything short of restoring the contact between students and teachers, ideally in person or at least virtually, is just a patchwork that cannot stem the erosion of accumulated learning, not to speak of building on it.

The threat to education is not unique to Bangladesh. Every country is facing it. There is much we can learn from each other about how to minimise the negative impact on education systems. A report published by Unesco, Unicef and the WB in October 2020 found that responses of various countries included remote learning, in the form of online, TV and radio programmes and take-home packages; facilitating access to online learning, most frequently through mobile phones or offering internet access at subsidised or no cost; and providing materials to help guide parents in home-

# Finance is vital for the success of COP26



SALEEMUL HUQ

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

THE United Kingdom—as the incoming President of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November—held a ministerial meeting on March 31 to discuss the issue of raising adequate funds for enabling developing countries to tackle climate change.

The COP26 Presidency invited ministers from about 40 developing and developed countries, and also key institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Bangladesh was amongst the countries invited, and the foreign minister of Bangladesh spoke on behalf of both Bangladesh and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which is currently chaired by Bangladesh. Although the speeches of individual speakers were not made public, the COP26 Presidency has released a summary of the discussions held with pledges of follow-up action from the UK as COP26 President going forward.

The good news is that this was a very timely meeting on one of the most important global issues that will determine not only the success of COP26 but also, more importantly, how developing countries will be able to tackle the reality of climate change which is already affecting them.

The main discussion at the meeting revolved around the promise made in 2015 in the Paris Agreement by developed countries about providing a total of USD 100 billion to developing countries each year from 2020 onwards. Another talking point was the fact that this amount was meant to be a foundation, to be built on in each

subsequent year. Unfortunately, the experience so far has fallen short both in terms of the total amount provided in 2020 and the distribution between support for mitigation versus support for adaptation. Vulnerable developing countries demanded a 50-50 split between support for mitigation and adaptation while, in practice, there has been 80 percent support for mitigation and only 20 percent for adaptation.

Damage, which was agreed to be set up at COP25 in Madrid, Spain in 2019. The UK COP26 Presidency plans to hold some consultations on this during the COP26 summit, which is a positive development.

However, a more important aspect in terms of dealing with loss and damage is financing the victims. This was, unfortunately, not resolved at COP25 in Madrid but it was agreed that there would be an exploration of potential avenues

crowdsourcing of funds from citizens or organisations from any country which would support the poorest victims of climate change in the most vulnerable developing countries. With regard to who would manage such a fund, one possibility might be a consortium of major international NGOs. Another possibility could be the fund that has already been set up by the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) countries. There are also some excellent ideas being put forward by different countries and groups to use debt swaps or even pre-disaster financial support (such as the forecast-based financing that the Red Cross has initiated in a number of countries, including in Bangladesh).

In the context of Bangladesh, there is an initiative underway to take a public-private partnership approach and a whole-of-society approach to setting up a National Mechanism on Loss and Damage, where the reserve funds that have been created under the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), which is equivalent to over USD 100 million by now, could be utilised to initiate financing for loss and damage in Bangladesh.

These are just some of the ideas that could be explored in a positive atmosphere of discussion prior to and at COP26 with a decision to make them more concrete by COP27, which will be hosted in Africa in 2022.

The bottom line is that the need for financial support for the poorest victims in the poorest developing countries is now an unavoidable reality that has to be addressed in a befitting manner. All governments as well as non-governmental actors should come up with ideas which could be taken forward out of a sense of solidarity with the victims of human-induced climate change.

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The need for financial support for the poorest victims of climate change is now an unavoidable reality.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

The COP26 Presidency promised to lobby with the developed countries to enhance their share of support for adaptation for the most vulnerable developing countries by June this year. This will be a key outcome for COP26 as, without financial support, the developing countries' COP goals will not be achieved.

Another positive outcome of the ministerial meeting was to establish that the issue of loss and damage was now important to recognise and act upon. This would include the preparation of the Santiago Network on Loss and

for new and additional sources of finance for loss and damage, and there are some ideas for how this can be done.

The first point is that this issue has become politically sensitive due to the framing of liability and compensation from the polluting countries, which the developed countries are not willing to acknowledge yet.

However, this does not preclude the possibility of raising funds from either governments or non-governmental sources through a framing of solidarity, rather than liability and compensation. This could be done through a