

Low levels of testing are hampering our Covid response



It has been more than a year since Covid-19 was first detected in Bangladesh. Much has been, and continues to be, said about the country's handling of the pandemic. From the perplexing policies on "strict" lockdowns and "lockdown lite" to the lack of enforcement of health guidelines, experts have cried hoarse about it all. But one aspect that is unfortunately absent from the conversation is Bangladesh's dismally low levels of Covid-19 testing. Although there was some talk about the low testing rates during the first few months after the virus was detected, now more than a year later, the critical issue of bare minimum testing rates seems to have faded into oblivion. One does not have to be a public health expert or biostatistician to understand the problem at hand. In a country with a population of over 160 million, anywhere between 25,000 and 30,000 samples are being tested each day. This is a drop in the ocean. It is true that testing rates all over the world are sub-par and Bangladesh is not alone. But there is an urgent need to acknowledge that this is a serious obstacle in our Covid-19 response. According to the Covid-19 dataset compiled by Our World in Data (which, by the way, is an excellent

repository of global Covid-19 stats), Bangladesh is trailing its South Asian neighbours India, Nepal and Pakistan when it comes to *new* tests per thousand population. As per the latest figures (April 25-26) presented by Our World in Data, India is conducting 1.016 new tests per 1,000 people each day; Nepal 0.319; and Pakistan 0.227. Bangladesh is carrying out 0.157 new tests per 1,000 people. Developed

testing, more Covid-positive cases will be detected. Patients can then be identified, isolated and treated. Without enough testing, we risk Covid-positive individuals going undetected, roaming free and unknowingly spreading the virus. Secondly, low testing rates lead to low number of identified cases which in turn significantly influences health behaviours. People without adequate

people's overall health behaviour and demotivates them to adhere to health guidelines. This explains why weddings and social gatherings had resumed early this year, when Bangladesh was recording lows of 200 and 300-something cases (in February). All this must also be viewed within our cultural context where people are inherently social in nature and generally lack health consciousness.

transmission and suggests that there are likely more infected people who have not been tested yet. Lack of testing, on the other hand, means that the virus is spreading silently, increasing the possibility of larger outbreaks that will be hard to contain in the future. So while it is reasonable to rely on the positivity rate to understand how widespread the virus is, it is not a substitute for increased testing.

Even less attention is being given to *who* is being tested and *where*. Data on district-wise daily number of tests are not available; neither are- disaggregated data, by income and location, of those who have been tested and have tested positive. This would have given us a clearer picture of who is being tested and where, which socioeconomic groups the majority of infected people belong to, and more importantly, which groups are being left out of Covid-19 testing. One can't help but wonder how the absurd idea that the poor in Bangladesh have "immunity against corona" originated. Such unscientific claims are being spewed by even the educated sections of society. Could it be due to the lack of testing and therefore lack of detected cases among these low-income groups?

There is an urgent need to ramp up Covid-19 testing across the country. This is necessary not only to detect cases silently spreading the virus at a time when the country is well into its second wave, but also to create a strong evidence base to formulate well-thought-out strategies of containment of the virus. Data matters. Lack of proper data, as a result of low levels of testing, creates misconceptions about the spread of the virus and disincentivises people from taking preventative health measures. We must also play our part and continue to emphasise the importance of maintaining health guidelines to those we come into contact with, regardless of what the official figures say.

This is not the time to let a false sense of security set in.

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File photo of people waiting in a queue outside the Mugda Medical College Hospital in Dhaka to get tested for Covid-19, on March 21, 2021.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HUQ

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countries with high figures for new daily tests per thousand population include the United Kingdom (21,768) and United Arab Emirates (25.9).

Most people seem to gloss over the little detail about the number of tests presented in the daily government briefings regarding Covid-19 cases. But there are a number of reasons (some quite obvious) why testing rates are so important. Firstly, with more

health literacy (the majority of the population) do not critically look at the official number of Covid-19 cases that are released every day through a scientific lens. They blindly rely on these figures to understand the spread of the virus. So, when they see "low" numbers of Covid-19 cases being detected, the message they receive is that the Covid-19 situation is "under control". This no doubt negatively influences

In an article published in the website of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the authors, both professors of epidemiology at Bloomberg School, explain the significance and implications of "percent positive" and inadequate testing. "Percent positive", quite simply, indicates the percentage of all tests that turned out to be positive. A higher percent positive points to higher

We cannot end poverty without ending corruption

ISMAIL ALI

HOW do corruption and poverty impact each other? I remember reading "Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty", a book gifted by a German friend of mine on my birthday. A comparative study of Germany and Bangladesh can offer important insights. The difference in the levels of poverty and prosperity between the two countries is staggering. In Germany, the current rate of per capita Gross Domestic Product is USD 45,466; the country is placed sixth in the global Human Development Index ranking (a measure combining health, wealth and education), and it ranks 22nd in the world in terms of ease-of-doing-business. Whereas in Bangladesh, per capita GDP stands at around USD 2,122—and it comes in at 133rd and 168th positions, respectively, in the aforementioned rankings. In the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2020), while Germany is ranked ninth, Bangladesh ranks at 146th as

residing on the Mexican side of the border.

Although some scholars view corruption as an enabler of development rather than an obstacle, particularly at an early stage of modernisation and development, numerous studies on corruption concluded that communities incur substantial economic and social costs as a result of it. The use of public office for private gains always benefits a powerful few,



ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

while imposing huge costs on large sections of society.

Jeffrey Sachs, one of the most talented development scholars of our time, sees corruption as a poverty trap: poverty causes corruption, and corruption causes poverty. Likewise, the World Bank—while determining corruption as a major challenge in achieving its twin goals (ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity) for the poorest 40 percent of people in developing countries—pointed out that, "every stolen or misdirected dollar robs the poor of an equal opportunity in life and prevents governments from investing in their human capital."

Empirical studies have also shown that the poor pay the highest percentage of their income in bribes when accessing services such as health, education and justice. Moreover, corruption diverts precious government resources away from schools, hospitals and other essential services, and locks people into poverty.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the annual cost of bribery alone is about USD 1.5-2 trillion (roughly 2 percent of global GDP) which is siphoned out of developing countries each year through money laundering and dodgy deals. This cash could generate tax revenues which could be used to invest in fighting poverty, stimulating growth and creating jobs, according to the IMF.

It is true that the lack of natural

resources, geography, political instability, culture, weather and knowledge base, among other influences, play a pivotal role in answering one of the most heavily discussed economic questions of our time: why are some countries rich and the others poor? In his pioneering work "The Bottom Billion", Oxford University professor Paul Collier identifies four distinct poverty traps—civil war, natural resource endowment, being

landlocked with bad neighbours, and having bad governance—in 58 of the world's poorest countries. However, he highlights that corruption can make even resource-rich societies poor. Collier shows how leaders of many of the poorest countries, pocketing from large surpluses of natural resources and embezzling funds from mega development projects, are themselves among the global super-rich.

The Begum Para in Toronto, Canada—an opulent neighbourhood where Bangladeshi millionaires are known for buying and settling in luxurious houses—is a prime example of how the powerful plunder public money while keeping their own countrymen impoverished.

Banerjee and Duflo, two Nobel Prize winning economists, in their seminal book, "Poor Economics", further explore the connection between corruption and poverty. Although they dispute the widely-held belief that the single greatest cause of entrenched poverty is poor governance and corruption, they also observed that it would be a waste of time for North Koreans to read their book if they cannot somehow get rid of their dictator. It is not possible to implement good policies if politics is not right. For example, spending billions of dollars in building schools, hospitals and roads could be a waste of money if the political system is unable to ensure that teachers and nurses regularly go to work and that truck drivers cannot

drive massively overloaded trucks by paying a small bribe to the police.

It is not just the city of Nogales—the differences between South and North Korea, the former countries of East and West Germany, and the massive economic leaps made by

Botswana, Malaysia, and Singapore prove that good governance matters very much when it comes to economic development. Myanmar could be Asia's next failed state due to its ongoing political chaos, as *The Economist* predicts. So to move

from poverty to prosperity, it is not enough for a country to figure out good economic policies, it must root out corruption from its political and governance processes.

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Tender ID	Lot/Package Location (Name of Institution)	Procurement Method	Publication Date & Time	Tender Document Last Selling/ Date & Time	Tender Closing Date & Time
572531	Construction of Single Story Academic Building with 4-storied foundation including Sanitary Water supply Electrification & Deep Tube well works at Mudaffargonj A. U. Fazil Madrassha, Laksam, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.00)
572532	Construction of Single Story Academic Building with 4-storied foundation including Sanitary Water supply Electrification & Deep Tube well works at Pipulia Fazil Madrassha, Sadar South, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.00)
572494	Construction of Single Story Academic Building with 4-storied foundation including Sanitary Water supply Electrification & Deep Tube well works at Baraipur Islamia Dhakhil Madrassha, Lalmai, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.00)
573270	Vertical Extension of 1st and 2nd floor including Sanitary Water supply & Electrification works at Juranpur Adarsha University College, Daudkandi, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.00)
573272	Vertical Extension of 1st and 2nd floor including Sanitary Water supply & Electrification works at Jamua High School, Lalmai, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.00)
573273	Vertical Extension of 1st and 2nd floor including Sanitary Water supply & Electrification works at Borokota School and College, Daudkandi, Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.30)
573275	Vertical Extension of 2nd floor EED Building at Cumilla Govt. College Adarsha Sadar Cumilla	NCT (LTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.30)
574141	Vertical Extension of 1st and 2nd floor (Horizontal Toilet Block) including Sanitary Water supply & Electrification works at Joytipal Mohathero Buddhist Orphan Home High School, Laksam, Cumilla	NCT (OTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.30)
574142	Vertical Extension of 1st and 2nd floor including Sanitary Water supply & Electrification works at Choudhagram Nojomia Dhakhil Madrassha, Choudhagram, Cumilla	NCT ((OTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.30)
574143	Manufacturing & Supply of Furniture at Khurul Ajgoria Alim Madrassha Muradnagar Cumilla	NCT (OTM)	02/05/2021 (22.00)	19/05/2021 (16.00)	20/05/2021 (12.30)

The Provisions laid down in the "PPA & PPR -2008 including latest all amendment" and STD will be Followed.
Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)

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one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

In "Why Nations Fail", authors Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson conclude that "underdevelopment is the result of political elites in developing countries who deliberately plunder their people and keep them impoverished." Citing examples from the city of Nogales—which is located half in Mexico and half in the United States—they show that people living on the US side are well-educated, prosperous, and enjoy far higher life expectancies than those

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