

Continued closure of educational institutions

But what's the plan?

GOING back on its plan to reopen schools and colleges partially, the government has once again extended the closure of schools and colleges to June 30. Earlier the education minister had announced that all educational institutions would open from June 12. Understandably, the Covid situation with a new surge in infections has led to such a decision. However, it is rather incongruous to see life running at a normal level in every sector despite the lockdowns, except in the education sector. It is also a fact that the country has been hit by the second wave, but that has affected the border areas more than the hinterlands.

Classes have been suspended since March last year, and the adverse consequences of such a long hiatus from classroom has had its effect on the students in lesser or greater degree which cannot be lost upon our planners. Pushing back plans constantly to reopen educational institutions is frustrating for the students, teachers and parents. Thus, such a situation demands a well deliberated action plan for all the educational institutions all over the country.

The idea of wide-scale remote or distant or online learning is impracticable in Bangladesh. And this too has been limited to the affluent and mainly to the upscale schools and colleges in the Capital. How many students can afford the facilities to participate in online classes? What about the students of the outlying districts whose access to IT facilities is very limited if at all? And what about the primary schools? It does not need an expert to suggest that the so-called auto promotion is self-defeating.

The idea of not opening the universities till every student has been vaccinated defies logic. We ask if the government needs to wait for the infection rate to come down to 5 percent all over the country. Why do all the education institutions have to open at the same time all over the country? Why can't those areas with less than 5 percent positivity rate at present, and there are a few, open without further ado? Why can't safety measures be enforced in all schools and colleges? To start with, can't the schools and colleges run in shifts, and can't students attend school for three instead of five or six days? There are rafts of alternatives, which those who are capable of thinking and offering practicable alternatives can offer. All we can assume from the way the education sector has been handled during the pandemic is that very little thought has been given to devise ways and means to tide over the situation in a manner that would ensure safety of the students as well as disrupt their education as little as possible. We believe that the government should not rely entirely on bureaucrats but fall back on experts for their suggestions, some of which have already appeared in the print media. The education minister should seek their ideas.

Are we doing anything about the latest spike in Covid infections?

Hospitals are again underprepared

HEALTH experts had warned earlier that if the Indian variant of Covid-19 (also known as Delta variant) can make its way into areas other than the bordering ones, Bangladesh will likely witness more than 20,000 covid-19 cases a day in early July. It seems that this prediction is becoming real, given the rise in Covid-19 cases all around the country. According to a DS report published yesterday, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) told that the Covid-19 transmission rate has increased by 27.2 percent this week, which is the highest in the last three weeks. DGHS is considering the Delta/Indian variant of Covid-19 as the possible reason behind this sudden spike in infections.

Two districts, namely Khulna and Rajshahi, are bearing the brunt of this increased rate of the infection the most. As Khulna borders with Satkhira which in turn borders India, all the Covid-19 patients of the Indian variant are gathering at Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) as there aren't any proper facilities for Covid-19 treatment in Satkhira's hospitals. Same goes for Rajshahi, which borders Chapainawabganj, which in turn borders India. The positivity rate, the number of new cases and the number of deaths emanating from Covid-19- all are showing an upward trajectory across the nation. KMCH even had to stop admitting new patients as it didn't have enough capacity to tackle the huge number. Out of the 100-bed capacity, there are 131 Covid-19 patients who are undergoing treatment at KMCH right now. There is also the possibility of the Delta variant reaching other areas in the mainland including Dhaka which may be underprepared according to experts.

Putting the bordering districts and districts near to the bordering ones into strict and complete lockdown is the first thing that the government has to do to combat the emergence of a new variant of the deadly Covid-19 epidemic. Inter-district transport system has to be stopped too. Hospitals in the bordering areas need to be given sufficient equipment and manpower so that all the burden doesn't fall on a few hospitals. It goes without saying these hospitals are in urgent need of increasing capacity—more ICU beds, testing capacity and uninterrupted oxygen supply. Although these basic requirements should have been fulfilled weeks ago, now there is no time to waste as lives are being lost because of lack of essential facilities in these hospitals.

Recovery from the pandemic will depend on data-driven policy-making

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE finance minister has recently rejected the survey findings of multiple organisations on the number of "new poor" created due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A number of think tanks including the non-government ones have undertaken representative household surveys on the employment and income loss due to the pandemic. Numbers vary across organisations. However, each of them has shown that the pandemic has eroded income of the poor and low-income families as they lost employment. This has pushed them into poverty. So, the number of the poor has increased compared to the pre-Covid period.

Surprisingly, the recently announced national budget for fiscal year (FY) 2022 has not mentioned anything about the new poor. Hence, there has not been any fiscal measures for them. The absence of the new poor in an important government document such as the national budget is equivalent to non-recognition of this hard-hit population. The minister is said to have mentioned that survey data by the non-government think tanks on the Covid-induced poor are not acceptable to him.

Unfortunately, despite having more financial and human resource capacity than the think tanks, no survey has been undertaken by the official data supplying organisation—Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Even after about 16 months since the outbreak of the pandemic in the country, BBS did not feel the urge to conduct a survey to have a thorough understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the economy and society. In the absence of such an initiative, several think tanks conducted both online and field-level surveys to estimate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on various sections of the people.

These surveys are crucial not only for researchers but also for the government. Researchers analyse data and suggest policies. The government has to take decisions based on the data and analysis. The Centre for Policy Dialogue has been urging for timely, up-to-date and credible data for sound and effective decision making by the government for long. In view of the current debate on the poverty numbers suggested by the think tanks, a few data related problems are reiterated here.

First, there is a lack of adequate and timely data in Bangladesh. A number of important surveys are conducted by BBS after a certain time gap. BBS conducts important surveys such as the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) once in every five years, and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) once in every three years. Then the release of the survey results takes a while. So, researchers have to use this dated data for their analyses and policy recommendations. The government takes decisions based on these data for a couple of years. These surveys are conducted at large scale as these have to be representative. Therefore,

these are expensive. But to address the data gap and make data relevant, BBS can conduct a smaller survey biennially to complement the larger surveys. This, of course, is not a full-proof method, but at least these can provide some idea on the trend of major indicators. In the absence of current surveys, when the Ministry of Finance (MoF) uses data to prepare the national budget, it cannot reflect the real situation.

Second, lack of disaggregated data hampers effective policy measures. Aggregate data on many socio-economic indicators cannot provide much information. Therefore, disaggregated data at the sub-district and union levels are essential. Such information is useful not only for robust analysis but also for designing emergency response at times of crisis. The availability of such disaggregated data could have helped in better targeting of social safety measures for the affected people during the

case of data on Annual Development Programme, information provided by the MoF are sometimes different from the ones supplied by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division of the Planning Commission. Also, at times, budget deficit and financing data vary between the MoF and Bangladesh Bank. Numbers are also found to be different at times for similar types of data from various sources. For example, information generated by a few surveys such as Sample Vital Registration System, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey sometimes indicate different figures for the same type of information. The estimate on the growth of gross domestic product (GDP) is widely discussed since the numbers often do not correspond with supporting indicators, such as private investment and employment generation. The solution to such incoherence requires harmonisation of data collected from

discontinued following analysis of those data by experts.

Fifth, BBS must initiate data collection in order to set realistic goals during the pandemic. In the absence of official nationally representative data, several non-government think tanks have collected some critical socio-economic data. Some are still collecting such data. To ensure consistency, credibility and representativeness of data collected by non-government think tanks, BBS should extend cooperation to those institutions by sharing its survey methodologies.

Sixth, there is no alternative to a strong government institution such as BBS for data collection. The organisation needs to enhance its capacity by recruiting more statisticians. It should also reinvigorate its technical committees by engaging more experts. More financial resources are also needed to conduct surveys annually. Additionally, BBS should be more independent and transparent in data



ongoing pandemic. For better targeting and selection of beneficiaries under social safety net programmes, BBS has been preparing a National Household Database. This is long overdue since this was to be completed by 2017. Needless to say, this could have been extremely useful for distribution of the cash support by the government during the ongoing pandemic. To help the pandemic-affected poor people, the government had announced to distribute Tk 2,500 among 50 lakh poor households in 2020. However, the support could be distributed among 35 lakh households only due to lack of proper listing of the poor beneficiaries. This has been an example of how data limitation can constrain government efforts to implement its decision.

Third, the quality of available data is poor due to lack of reliability, standardisation and consistency. We often find two different numbers in case of revenue data from the MoF and from the National Board of Revenue. In

different surveys through better inter-agency coordination.

Fourth, data are also inaccessible at times. Since we have to rely on government sources for data, access to data is becoming difficult day by day. Sharing of data online is yet to be practiced widely in Bangladesh. Often it takes a long time to receive data from the organisations we request data from. At times, some organisations do not reply to our requests at all. Some would even decline on your face to provide data. Such non-cooperation could be due to fear among officials. There could be political pressure on them. Some officials would tell us that their data are confidential. It is difficult to understand what confidentiality would be there in publishing and sharing those data which are publicly available in other countries. The hesitation to face public scrutiny probably hinders the responsible organisations from publishing data. We recall, BBS published quarterly LFS data a couple of years ago. But this was

generation and their dissemination to improve its credibility. The institution, as the prime source of official data, should have regular consultations with major users of data including the planning commission, think tanks, the private sector and non-government organisations.

Finally, the recovery from the pandemic will depend on the policy measures by the government. The effectiveness of these measures will depend on proper understanding of the state of the economy based on field-level data on key indicators including investment, production, employment, poverty and inequality. Authentic data on health indicators are also required. There has been an indifference towards the importance of quality data. It is time that the policymakers not only ensure the availability of reliable data but also use these data for effective decision making at this crucial juncture of history.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Views expressed in this article are personal.

Our industry is digitising rapidly, are we ready?



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

WE all knew the global pandemic would change the business world in some way but, until recently, it has been difficult to pinpoint precisely how. For many of us, the past 16 months have been a fight to remain competitive above all else. Indeed, for some, it has been a fight for survival.

As the dust begins to settle, however, and normal trading begins to properly resume in many of Bangladesh's largest export markets, one trend is presenting itself loud and clear: the shift to online, e-commerce sales.

I have followed with interest the financial results of the leading fashion brands and retailers these past few months. In the financial statements of all, online sales are growing rapidly—by 30, 40 and 50 percent or more in many cases. On the contrary, in-store sales are flatlining and even shrinking in a lot of instances. Shops are being closed as retailers look to save money on costly rents in buildings where footfall is shrinking fast.

The chief executives of many brands have already stated quite publicly that the online shift is here to stay—beyond the pandemic. The move to e-commerce is permanent, and will likely continue to gather pace.

This has potentially profound implications for Bangladesh if we wish to remain a valued partner of major western brands. There are numerous issues we need to consider around government policy, the existing digital infrastructure and the regulatory environment. Will they all be fit for purpose in an environment which is increasingly digital? I believe there are several things we

need to do to remain relevant as a trading partner.

Number one is having a resilient and cyber secure digital infrastructure to build trust and tell our trading partners Bangladesh is a country that can be relied upon. Therefore I was so pleased last year when the World Bank announced it was funding a four-year project in Bangladesh to improve cybersecurity, build resiliency during future crises, and



enable the government to operate virtually to deliver critical public services to citizens and businesses. As well as reducing vulnerabilities from the pandemic, this work will also help us prepare for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, helping to digitise small and medium enterprises and strategic industries.

The next thing I believe we need to consider is training and education. We already have a world class ready-made garment (RMG) industry. But running in parallel to this we need the brightest, most agile digital minds. Experts in software development, coding, website development, online marketing—and a whole-range of other areas in between.

Digital skills shortages will hold our economy back; they will hold our garment sector back.

We should also be in no doubt that our competitors are already pressing ahead in this area, including the likes of India, Pakistan and, of course, China. There is no time to waste.

The third area I believe we need to consider is tie-ups and partnerships with existing digital platforms. In a development we should all be taking note of, Pakistan recently announced its participation on the Amazon seller list—a move which will open up huge business opportunities for small to medium sized enterprises in that country.

Some experts believe Pakistan's participation on Amazon could generate up to one billion dollars' worth of exports and create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Bangladesh needs to be considering fully its options for Amazon, ebay and the many other selling platforms which have proliferated globally in recent years. Indeed, I firmly believe our government should be looking to prepare training and development programmes to ensure our businesses can take full advantage from new opportunities offered by such platforms.

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Such training, to be developed in conjunction with digital experts, including our universities, would support our business owners to improve quality and packaging of their products to the standards of Amazon and other platforms.

As indicated, it is not just Amazon. There are other selling platforms around the world, many of them specific to markets such as China (a huge export opportunity). Do we have the international trade experts within government to enable us to tap into these markets and understand how these platforms work? Often selling into new markets, even digitally, requires an understanding of cultural nuance as well different laws around issues such as customs, product packaging and legal regulations.

Finally, I believe the most important thing we must all be doing as exporters right now is talking to our customers—fashion brands and retailers. This sounds like an obvious point to make but it's surprising how many suppliers forget to do this regularly enough. It is also important to state that, as indicated, the past 12-months have seen a whirlwind of change, and this is ongoing. This change is having a huge impact on brands in terms of their logistics—their warehousing, their inventory levels, their requirements in terms of order sizes (smaller is increasingly popular) and so on.

Are we, as a supplier base, enabling them to better operate in this shifting environment? What can we do on a digital front to make their life easier, what kind of software do we need to invest in—in short, what do we need to do to become a trusted supplier and support them on their own digital journey?

Our rivals abroad will be asking these same questions and, as they say, the early bird catches the worm.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE) and Bangladesh Denim Expo.