Amidst a faltering COVAX, time for world leaders to step up

AMIR KHASRU

THE International Monetary Fund (IMF) in a May 19, 2021 note uploaded on its website stated that "Pandemic policy is also economic policy as there is no durable end to the economic crisis without an end to the health crisis." The IMF then proposed three targets to that end: (1) vaccinating at least 40 percent of the population in all countries by the end of 2021 and at least 60 percent by the first half of 2022; (2) tracking and insuring against downside risks; and (3) ensuring widespread testing and tracing.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) advised that at least 70 percent of the world population must be vaccinated in order to end the coronavirus pandemic. Even if this requirement cannot be fulfilled in the near future, the IMF's 40 percent vaccination target should cover a minimum of 3 to 4 billion people. According to an article published on The Conversation website on June 9, 2021, Professor Monica de Bolle of the Johns Hopkins University estimated that if 60 percent to 70 percent of 8 billion people need to be vaccinated to achieve herd protection, it would require 10 billion to 12 billion doses of a two-dose vaccine. If the global capacity for Covid-19 vaccine production is 2 billion to 4 billion doses annually, it could be 2023 or even 2024 before enough vaccines can be produced.

However, as well as the availability of vaccines, another major concern is the discrimination in vaccine access as rich countries are stockpiling most of the supplies. According to a report by *The New York Times*, till date more than 2.54 billion vaccine doses have been administered worldwide. While this may sound like a hopeful scenario, the devil is in the details. "86 percent of the shots that have gone into arms worldwide have been administered in high- and upper-middle-income countries. Only 0.3 percent of doses have been administered in low-income countries," the report says. Because of the widespread discrimination in vaccine access, some countries are yet to get a single dose of vaccination.

The WHO, in a June 11 report, said that some 130 core people in the African countries severely lack access to vaccination. Many countries only received a fraction of what they need, with no guarantee for the rest. For instance, South Africa, which purchased vaccines from international market and are producing vaccines as part of a joint-venture arrangement, were able to vaccinate only 0.8 percent of its population. Another large African country, Nigeria could afford to vaccinate only 0.1 percent of its 200-million population.

As of June 11, Israel vaccinated 60 percent of its population, Bahrain 62 percent, Chile 60 percent, the UK 61 percent, and the USA

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'If one considers the entire scenario, one cannot help but worry if the COVAX can at all fulfil its objectives.' PHOTO: REUTERS

52 percent. On the other hand, India only vaccinated 14 percent, Indonesia 7 percent, Sri Lanka 9.6 percent, and Bangladesh 3.6 percent. According to a report in February, Bangladesh was in the 17th position in terms of vaccination. Now it dropped to the 117th due to having not received the vaccine as it was supposed to. Region-wise data also shows distinct levels of discrimination. As of June 17, North America administered vaccines for 68 percent of the entire population. Europe has vaccinated 58 percent, South America 34 percent, Asia 31 percent, Oceania 17 percent, and Africa 3.1 percent. Only 0.3 percent of doses have been administered in the low-income countries.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom stated in a Geneva meeting on May 24 that more than 75 percent of the vaccines had been administered in only 10 countries. He termed this as a "scandalous inequality". He urged that at least 10 percent of the world population be vaccinated by September at any cost. Less than a month later, the reality hasn't changed much.

In April 2020, the COVAX initiative started with an aim to facilitate equitable access to vaccines for middle-income and poorer countries. The main two objectives were equitable access to diagnostics and treatment. However, despite initial promise, the arrangement has come to a halt of late.

Now the question is whether the COVAX was a meaningful initiative at all. WHO in a joint statement with its partners has said: "Designed and implemented in the midst of an unprecedented global public health crisis, it has delivered over 70 million doses to 126 countries and economies around the world since February... Over 35 countries received their first Covid-19 vaccine doses thanks to COVAX." In the same statement, it also said that "if the world's leaders rally together, the original COVAX objectives—delivery of 2 billion doses of vaccines worldwide in 2021, and 1.8 billion doses to 92 lower-income economies by early 2022—are still well within reach."

Against this backdrop, the leaders of G-7, a coalition of powerful countries, committed 870 million vaccines for the third-world countries to be delivered by 2022. This is less than half of the original objective of the COVAX initiative. It can be assumed that the G-7 countries have more vaccines in their stocks.

If one considers the entire scenario, one cannot help but worry if the COVAX can at all fulfil its objectives, and if and how the IMF proposal to vaccinate 40 percent of the world population by 2021 and 60 percent by the first half of 2022 for greater economic recovery will be achieved. Ultimately, this is not just an economic issue; more importantly, it is also an existential one for all of us. As it was mentioned by the WHO director-general in May, 75 percent of all vaccines were administered in just 10 countries, but the question remains, can these 10 countries ensure their safety without helping ensure the safety of the people in other parts of the world? If world leaders don't come up with better solutions to cover the stark vaccination gap among different regions (and countries), what hope is there for us to defeat this deadly virus?

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Building teacher leadership to navigate the new normal in education

AZWA NAYEEM

BEING disconnected from school education since March 2020 has affected students in more ways than one. Although the learning gap is an inevitable outcome, its extent and nature remain unknown, while other skills such as collaborative and social-emotional skills are also bound to suffer. The nature and extent of discrepancies among students are unique to each community, with some commonalities across the region. Such a scenario demands teachers to design approaches based on individual student needs instead of applying generic or top-down solutions. Teachers need to act as leaders who can engage students, parents, the administration and other community members to co-create and implement community-rooted, learning-need-based solutions for equitable education.

In the wake of the pandemic, teachers took several initiatives to stay connected to their students and teach them. They took live classes on Facebook, created WhatsApp groups and phoned or texted students who did not have the internet. The pandemic suddenly gave them a license to innovate. However, many teachers have either been laid off with the prolonged school closure or face the risk of termination. Most teachers now feel demotivated and many have switched their field of work entirely. The initial momentum in initiatives and innovations got primarily disrupted by the inability of many teachers to cope with the new skill sets required to overcome the digital divide, stay connected and teach in the new normal. Empowering individual teachers to lead these unprecedented times can reinstil a sense of purpose into them and drive them to engage deeply within their schools' communities.

LEADERSHIP IN TEACHING-LEARNING

For starters, it is essential to equip the teachers with a repertoire of skills on blended learning approaches that have worked within and outside the country in similar contexts. The existing general ICT training for the primary and secondary government school teachers merely introduces them to some hardware and software, with little hands-on knowledge of integrating technology with pedagogy. Hence, a tech-phobia among many teachers prevents them from confidently taking the lead. Once they have the basic understanding of the blended pedagogy and can tango smoothly between tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches, they can create the recipes that best fit their case for equitable education. If given a clear understanding of the nuances of varying pedagogies—the science behind learning and learning in the new normal—teacher leaders can propose pedagogies of change as a response to specific students' contexts, needs and vulnerabilities, and engage relevant members of the community in the process.

ANYONE CAN LEAD

We must promote a culture that believes anyone, whether in formal or informal roles, can practice leadership by actively driving change towards a shared purpose. Often, it is assumed that leadership will be exercised only by those in the role of formal leadership, typified by positions such as head teachers, teacher officers, principals and school leaders. However, if we shift away from this top-down, hierarchical model, we can promote the agency and capacity of others to lead. Teachers who are empowered by their principals and school communities to make decisions both autonomously and collaboratively, and are involved in decision-making, will practice leadership not only for the development of the students and the school but also the community. It is essential to trust teachers to make autonomous decisions and lead change fully. Mutual trust needs to be complemented with a safe environment that accepts failure, and redefines it as a learning opportunity.

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PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

In a study by McKinsey, it was said: "Human nature being what it is, risk aversion (even fear) will rule people's actions if they do not actually believe it is safe to fail." Teachers will not be motivated to work as agents of change without the option to fail. However, the opportunity cost for failure is relatively high in education as children's future is involved. So, it is also essential to cushion the students from any fallout and prioritise their well-being.

COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION

Reflection is more than mulling over one's decision; it is an analytical process with purpose at its core that begins with diagnosing the problem, defining and redefining it, designing and redesigning the solution, and evaluating the impact to make informed choices. When this is done with colleagues in a safe and constructive environment that promotes critical evaluation of one's work to unlock new learning opportunities, it is called collaborative reflection. Teachers can allocate short periods of time during the week when they work with each other and other community members, like parents and local education authorities, to understand the nature of the problem in their schools, co-create a solution, and distribute responsibilities—and then reconvene to evaluate the impact and re-design the solution for greater efficacy. The colossal nature of the challenges we face demands that we engage all the relevant stakeholders to drive change through distributed leadership and collaborative reflection.

REMOVING EXISTING BARRIERS

On regular days, teachers are swamped with administrative duties. In government schools, teachers have to enlist voters, map catchment areas, in addition to performing their regular work, which makes it challenging for them to take on new roles and initiatives. Remote learning has reduced many of these added tasks and given them a scope to be at the forefront of innovative change. In some government schools located in remote areas, the number of teachers is insufficient. This overburdens the existing teachers. For them to move beyond their traditional roles, they need to be given room and flexibility.

So recruiting sufficient and qualified teachers to ensure a 1:28 teacher-student ratio is paramount to enabling teachers to practice the art of leadership. There is limited scope for career progression in the teaching profession in the country. By opening the doors to promotion into Zila and Upazila teacher officer positions and tying it with teacher performance and their leadership skills, community-rooted leadership practices can lead to equitable education across the country.

Azwa Nayeem is the Chairperson of Alokito Teachers and Alokito Hridoy Foundation.

QUOTABLE *Quote*

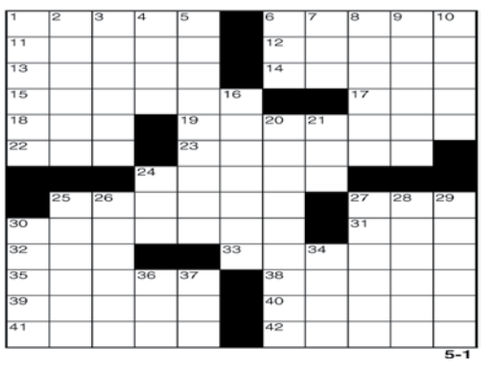
BEVERLY CLEARY
American writer (1916-2021)

Children should learn that reading is pleasure, not just something that teachers make you do in school.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Syrup source
6 Rabbit's home
11 Heavens supporter
12 Blue hue
13 Decade divisions
14 Spent
15 Anger, informally
17 Pester
18 Enzyme suffix
19 Kid's afternoon break
22 "You bet!"
23 Army makeup
24 Virtue
25 Rx amount
27 By way of
30 Vulcan's lookalike
31 Sphere
32 Binary digit
33 Remain for a bit
35 Conference site of 1945
38 Ridiculous
39 Enjoyed avidly
40 Wrath
41 Not bother
42 Lusty looks

DOWN
1 Distress call
2 Relaxed
3 Runway sights
4 Cooking fat
5 Needed
6 Pillbox, for one
7 Israeli gun
8 Rutabaga's cousin
9 Defeats decisively
10 Yard border
16 Helium, for one
20 Latent promise
21 Gift from Santa
24 Nittany Lions' sch.
25 Give
26 Brunch dish
27 Trip
28 Laundry worker
29 Doubleday et al.
30 Fit for a king
34 Writer Rice
36 Old boat
37 Zoo beast



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YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

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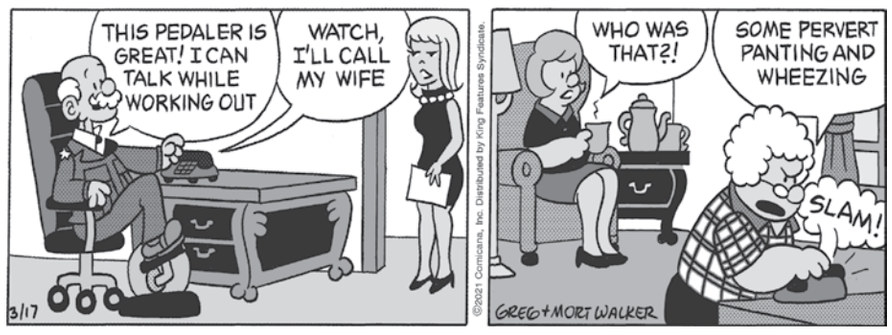
BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT