

Curbing Covid-19 is a priority, but so is continuing education

After 500 days of school/college closure, it's time for a critical rethink

SCHOOLS and colleges in Bangladesh have remained closed for more than 500 days now, causing immense damage to the life prospects of students and putting unwarranted mental and financial burdens on parents and teachers alike. Although the government has played with the idea of vaccinating university students in order to reopen universities sometime in the near future, no such plan has yet been put forth with regard to schools and colleges. The government had previously said that it would consider reopening schools and colleges once the positivity rate of coronavirus comes down to around five percent. However, as things stand, that still seems to be a long way away, as the positivity rate throughout the country continues to hover around the 30 percent mark. How long then will schools and colleges remain closed? And at what cost?

The pandemic has not only caused havoc in our education system; it has disrupted education across the world. Yet, if we look at China—where the virus originated—education did not stop during the pandemic. In fact, China managed to continue educating its children during the entire lockdown period using the help of technology. Although it must be conceded that there is a huge technological gap between China and Bangladesh—and indeed between different parts of Bangladesh itself—the fact that the government could not come up with any solution to this problem over the course of the last 500 days is incredibly disappointing. And what's even more disappointing is the lack of attempt or vision to do so.

Not only have the students suffered during this lengthy period of school closure, but the teachers and administrators have suffered too. The financial damage wrought by the pandemic has led to many parents failing to pay their children's school fees while schools remained closed. And thousands of schools have been forced to shut down as a result, while others couldn't afford to pay their teachers. If we look at just the kindergarten-level schools, around 3,000 of them have been forced to close down, resulting in some 3.5 lakh teachers becoming unemployed. Private schools that don't rely on government support have also faced similar problems, with many teachers getting discouraged and leaving the profession altogether. The long-term damage this will cause to our education system is impossible to estimate.

Back in July, Unicef and Unesco said that the continued school closure will lead to a "generational catastrophe", and we can't agree more. It is time for the government to prioritise educating our children, as it is on their shoulders that the future of this country will depend. The government should start consultations with experts in this field on an emergency basis and formulate strategies for the continuation of all forms and levels of education. If that requires the use of advanced technology, the government should find ways to bridge the technological gap between students and provide them with the necessary devices to resume their education within a blended learning framework. Supervised, partial reopening of schools and colleges in areas where the positivity rate is lower should not be ruled out either.

Errant private hospitals must be reined in

DGHS needs to be more proactive in checking malfeasance

ONE must admit that in the last two decades or so, the private hospitals have helped in supplementing the public healthcare sector in Bangladesh to a great extent. However, the need to beef up an inadequate public healthcare system saw a mushrooming of private hospitals and health centres, many of which, as it turned out eventually, did not have the required credentials to run those organisations. One of the positives of the pandemic, if a calamity can have any positive at all, has been that the actual conditions of a large number of such poorly staffed, badly set up, and inadequately equipped and run hospitals, lab centres and other such facilities have been exposed. The purpose of these hospitals is simply to make profits; providing healthcare is more of a secondary objective. The pandemic has also, painfully, bared the corrupt nexus between unscrupulous health service providers and health officials, without whose direct collusions such facilities would not have been able to exist and operate in the first place.

It is shocking to see how some of the private hospitals have overstepped their remit and treated patients for Covid-19, violating government orders. The exorbitant amount charged by some of these hospitals from patients for the treatment of Covid-19 defies logic. This has been the practice for a long time. Consequently, private health facilities of all definitions have become money-making concerns rather than healthcare providers.

One would have hoped that after the experiences of last year, the DGHS would be more proactive in bringing the hundreds of private hospitals, clinics and lab centres under scrutiny. Early this week, the health directorate inspected three hospitals in the capital's Uttara and found anomalies that border on criminality. While we commend the DGHS for launching quick investigations and temporarily suspending their operations, we would have hoped that the inspection had been done sooner, and not after receiving complaints from aggrieved patients. We also believe that the licences of these and other such facilities should be cancelled for good.

We suggest that the health administration carry out extensive combing operations to detect such errant establishments on a regular and proactive basis. And not only should their licenses be revoked, we believe their acts of commission and omission, which have resulted in a large number of deaths, should be treated as murders and duly proceeded against. We also think that the corrupt elements inside the health administration, who help keep these establishments afloat for their own benefits, should be identified and dealt with accordingly. Nothing less than proactive and stepped up vigilance can stop this nuisance in the name of healthcare.

The era of loss and damage from climate change is upon us

We must act immediately if we are to avert its worst impacts

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

OVER the last week of July 2021, we all watched on our TV screens as the heat dome and wildfires in north-western US and Canada took many lives and destroyed the town of Lytton in Canada. Then, the devastating floods in Germany and Belgium cost several hundred lives, followed by more loss of lives from devastating floods in China and India. Even here, in Bangladesh, several lives were lost in the Rohingya refugee camps from landslides following heavy rainfall.

As we await the publication of Working Group I (on the science of climate change) as part of the sixth assessment report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), I believe that we have clearly and unequivocally entered the era of human-induced climate change due to the fact that global mean temperature has risen over one degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels already due to past emissions of greenhouse gases.

This means that almost every single day, from now on, we will see record-breaking extreme heat, wildfires, floods and cyclones happening somewhere in the world, and that every year will be worse than the previous one for the next decade to come.

However, we can still avert the worst impacts in the long term by keeping global temperatures below 1.5 degrees Celsius, as all countries have agreed to do in the Paris Agreement at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) held in 2015. Unfortunately, we have not done enough to achieve that goal, but it is still achievable if every country enhances its actions to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. While we must redouble our collective efforts to keep the global temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius, we must also try to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change. Now, we also have to prepare for the inevitable loss and damage from human-induced climate change that is upon us already.

In practical terms, this means improving our early warning systems and also our post-disaster response systems in every country, regardless of whether the country is rich or poor.

Climate change impacts will occur everywhere. Bangladesh is fortunate to have invested in disaster preparedness, for both cyclones and floods (although the latter is more complicated), and has succeeded in bringing down the loss of lives, even though there is still a lot of damage to infrastructure, homes, crops and livelihoods. Bangladesh can share this experience with other countries as well.

At the global level, although there has been some progress on discussing the topic of loss and damage from climate change in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—such as the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on Loss and Damage set up in COP19 and the inclusion of loss and damage in Article 8 of the Paris Agreement—there has not been sufficient actions to assist countries to deal with the reality of human-induced climate change impacts.

Hence, the upcoming COP26 to be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November is going to be critical to address the issue with the priority that it clearly deserves. There are some encouraging signs from the recent ministerial meeting held in London, hosted by the UK (president of the incoming COP26), where the issue was indeed recognised as important. However, there is very little time left before COP26 to put something meaningful in place before November. Waiting until the COP will be too late—there are a few ideas that all countries

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must consider now and take forward seriously over the remaining months until COP26.

The first bit is relatively easy, and it is to agree on how to set up the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage (SNLD), which was agreed upon in COP25 in Madrid, Spain in 2019. This needs to be quickly set up in order to assist countries to take practical steps to tackle loss and damage from climate change on the

ground. A robust but flexible arrangement should be negotiated and agreed upon as quickly as possible.

The second and by far the more important bit is raising additional funding for addressing loss and damage, which the developing countries have been asking for but the developed countries have resisted until now. In COP25, while there was no agreement to provide funding for loss and damage, there was an agreement to explore new sources of additional funding

coming as well as where they arrive.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the reason that the developed countries have been so reluctant to even discuss loss and damage is their fear of opening themselves up to claims of liability and compensation. This should not be felt anymore, as the developing countries already agreed not to invoke liability or claim compensation as part of the Paris Agreement. The opportunity now exists for the developed countries to offer



Last week, several lives were lost in the Rohingya refugee camps from landslides following heavy rainfall. This photo is from September 2017, when heavy rainfall created similar havoc in the refugee camps.

PHOTO: REUTERS/CATHAL MCNAUGHTON

that could be built upon going forward.

One idea might be to consider enhancing the commitment from the richer countries to provide USD 100 billion a year to support mitigation and adaptation actions in the poorer countries—with an additional USD 50 billion to support loss and damage. So from, say, 2023 or 2024 onwards, the developed countries could provide USD 150 billion a year for mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage, and the funds could be used in combination of all three actions rather than being ring-fenced, which is not efficient.

An increasingly important aspect of loss and damage from climate change is the displacement of people and creation of climate refugees or climate migrants, which will add to the flow of migrants from poor to rich countries. The provision of funding for loss and damage could be a good way to pay for assisting such climate migrants, both from where they are

funding out of a sense of solidarity rather than compensation.

One way to take this issue forward seriously, up to and beyond COP26, would be for the UK to appoint a Special Envoy for Loss and Damage who could talk to all parties prior to the COP in order to find practical ways forward. Also, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres could appoint a Special Envoy on Loss and Damage to take the issue to COP26, COP27 and beyond, in order to make loss and damage a permanent high level agenda item in every COP going forward.

As we have already entered the new era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change, we must take measures on the ground as well as in the UNFCCC to deal with the issue effectively in order to prevent its worst impacts.

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Fortifying food: An effective strategy to combat hidden hunger



AVIJIT SAHA

BANGLADESH, despite being one of the world's fastest-growing economies with exceptional GDP growth, was unable to avoid extreme food insecurity during the pandemic, which was

experienced by a substantial proportion of the population. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated "hidden hunger" all over the world, resulting in negative public health repercussions.

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the reduction of under-five mortality (from 94 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1999–2000 to 31 in 2019), for which the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina received the United Nations Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Award in 2010. However, despite this success, the prevalence of chronic undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency is still going up. Approximately 25 percent of the population remains food insecure, and 36 percent of children under the age of five suffer from stunting, a classic symptom of chronic malnutrition.

On top of that, a dissemination seminar on "Preliminary findings of the National Micronutrient Survey in Bangladesh 2019-2020" revealed that the vitamin A deficiency among children (0-59 months) has increased alarmingly, from 20.5 percent in 2011 to 52.8 percent in 2019-20. Vitamin A deficiency for non-pregnant non-lactating (NPNL) women also went up from 5.4 percent in 2011 to 8.5 percent in 2019-20. A similar trend can also be found with regard to iron deficiency 14.9 percent (2019-20). However, the opposite trend can be found in the case of iodine, zinc and vitamin D, even though the country is still far from solving the issue of micronutrient deficiencies.

Hidden hunger is a micronutrient (vitamin and mineral) deficiency that occurs when the quality of food people eat does not meet their nutrient requirements, which hinder their growth and development. This can have several negative health and social consequences, including an increased risk of malnutrition, multiple infections, chronic

diseases, poor health and wellbeing, impaired learning, poor mental health, social conflict, and increased social and economic inequalities. These negative consequences also have the potential to jeopardise the overall developmental activities of citizens of various demographics.

Globally, USD 5.6 trillion economic loss is caused by malnutrition every year and in Bangladesh, this loss is more than Tk 7,000 crore (USD one billion).



In Bangladesh, 36 percent of children under the age of five suffer from stunting, a classic symptom of chronic malnutrition.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

With over 12 lakh citizens affected by Covid-19 to date, the long-standing need to boost immunity and maintain a healthy diet is now more important than ever. In the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020, Bangladesh was ranked 75 out of 107 countries, indicating a serious malnutrition epidemic, possibly made worse by the pandemic-induced lockdowns. In March this year, The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) placed Bangladesh in a list of countries that require external assistance in food to brave "severe localised food insecurity".

In this context, fortifying food is one of the most cost-effective and reliable investment choices in broader national initiatives to prevent chronic undernutrition. It is considered a highly effective intervention to reduce micronutrients deficiency among children

and pregnant women, which has escalated amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Fortified foods are enhanced with six essential vitamins and minerals that the poor segment of the population may otherwise not be able to afford due to lack of access to meat, fish, fruits and other non-rice products.

The UN Food Systems Summit 2021, which is going to take place this September, focuses on strengthening food systems, promoting healthy diets

health, nutritional status, survival, growth, development and productivity of the population by preventing and alleviating micronutrient deficiencies, the National Strategy for Prevention and Control of Micronutrient Deficiencies in Bangladesh (NSPCMD), 2015-2024, is being implemented. The Food Safety Act 2013 has also been a monumental step in providing a proper legal framework for ensuring food security for the poorest of the poor in the country.

Another positive development with regard to food fortification is the Mandatory Oil Fortification Act 2013, which makes provisions for the fortification of edible oils with vitamin A. The Act made it mandatory for storing, selling, supplying and marketing of edible oil fortified with vitamin A, whether it is produced locally, refined or imported. Additionally, Bangladesh was one of the first countries globally to introduce mandatory salt iodisation in 1989, aligning with the Universal Salt Iodisation (USI) Programme. Bangladesh has achieved significant success over the years in this regard, with 80.3 percent of households consuming iodised salt and 57 percent of households using adequately iodised salt, according to the National Salt Iodization Survey 2015. However, efforts are still needed to achieve the USI target (more than 90 percent of households) of adequately iodised salt coverage in Bangladesh. In 2021, the government of Bangladesh passed the Iodised Salt Bill, making iodisation of edible salts mandatory to prevent iodine deficiency disorders and improve the nutrition of millions of people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has emerged with new opportunities for boosting immune systems by promoting food fortification. Ideas like rice and oil fortification, and salt iodisation, have already been in the spotlight. However, we still need to focus more on how other micronutrients can be mixed with staple foods like wheat, maize flour or milk at very low costs. Finally, preventing vitamin D deficiency among high-risk population groups is yet to receive enough attention, and must be integrated into the strategy of multiple micronutrient supplementation.

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