

## An exercise in mega-mismanagement

*Mass vaccination trial run shows govt not yet up to the task*

TO any casual observer, Saturday's daylong mass vaccination trial run—meant to set the stage for a planned special vaccination campaign starting on August 14—would appear as yet another exhibition of our failures to fashion a workable response against Covid-19. It was an operation poorly planned and executed—there was no surprise there. According to our correspondents, people showed genuine enthusiasm to get vaccinated by spontaneously turning up at designated centres across the country. But there were just way more people than there were vaccines available. The whole exercise was marred by chaos, mismanagement and lack of coordination, as many centres ran out of doses two or three hours after vaccination began. In many places, people were seen standing in mile-long queues on roads, crowds jammed themselves into the centres, and protests and brawls broke out.

If the purpose of this exercise, as the health minister had earlier said, was to identify the problems of vaccine rollout and fix those before the main drive, it's evident that it will require a lot of fixing. Unfortunately, there is a lot to be done but not a lot of time to do it in. The trial run came at a time when the country just recorded its deadliest week during this pandemic. On Saturday, Bangladesh recorded 261 deaths from Covid-19—the second-highest daily death toll from Covid-19. Just two days ago, it had recorded 264 deaths, the highest single-day toll. Overall, a total of 1,726 died from Covid-19 in the past week, an increase of 5.3 percent from the week earlier, according to the data of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). Meanwhile, infections continue to be on the rise.

What these grim numbers tell us, beyond the urgency of further improving the treatment and testing protocols, is that we must now, more than any time before, build a functioning vaccination system based on timely supply and proper delivery. The time of experimentation is over, and we must look back to know what mistakes have been made and ensure those never occur again. As we have already said in this column before, the constant flip-flops and confusion over the government's plans, not just in terms of vaccination but also lockdowns and other Covid-related decisions, could place it in a serious credibility crisis.

Public awareness—both to check the pandemic by following safety rules and participate in the vaccination drive—is of course an important part of our fight. But the government cannot deny its responsibility to ensure people comply and cooperate. Right now, it appears the most important challenge is to ensure availability of enough vaccines to sustain the upcoming drive and build a well-coordinated system of delivery so that it doesn't, again, become a potential superspreading event. All arms of the state's vaccine-giving apparatus must learn their mistakes from the chaotic trial run they just conducted.

## Ensure inclusive development for indigenous populations

*Minority communities must not be left behind*

TODAY, on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, even as we celebrate the culture, heritage and diversity of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh, we also express our concern at the various challenges that many minority communities within the country continue to face. While it is commendable that the Bangladesh government has included the development of these marginalised populations in the country's Eighth Five Year Plan, it is important to remember that inclusive development has to go beyond increases in per capita income only—it must involve legal, land, health, educational and cultural rights as well.

Although there has been progress since the signing of the historic CHT Accord and numerous sections have been implemented over the past two decades, according to human rights activists, the issue of a land commission to protect land rights is still a thorn in the side of the country's ethnic minorities. In a recent discussion on the inclusion of indigenous peoples in sustainable development, jointly organised by the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) and Bangladesh Indigenous People Forum, activists spoke of how it is not only homesteads, gardens, trees, forestlands and lakes that are being taken over by land-grabbers—even crematoriums are at risk as well. Going forward, it is imperative that such instance of land-grabbing no longer go unpunished, and that the evicted are able to access justice from the state.

In March last year, *The Daily Star* also reported on a measles outbreak in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, revealing how the government's immunisation programme for infants and children had failed to reach some of the most remote areas of the country. While emergency assistance was given to the affected areas at the time, we hope that the government's long-term plans for the region will also involve increasing access to critical healthcare. Now more than ever, the Covid-19 pandemic has shone a renewed light on how important it is to invest in health systems alongside prioritising economic development. We also hope, once education is allowed to resume, that the authorities will continue to stress on the importance of education in the mother tongue of children from different ethnic communities.

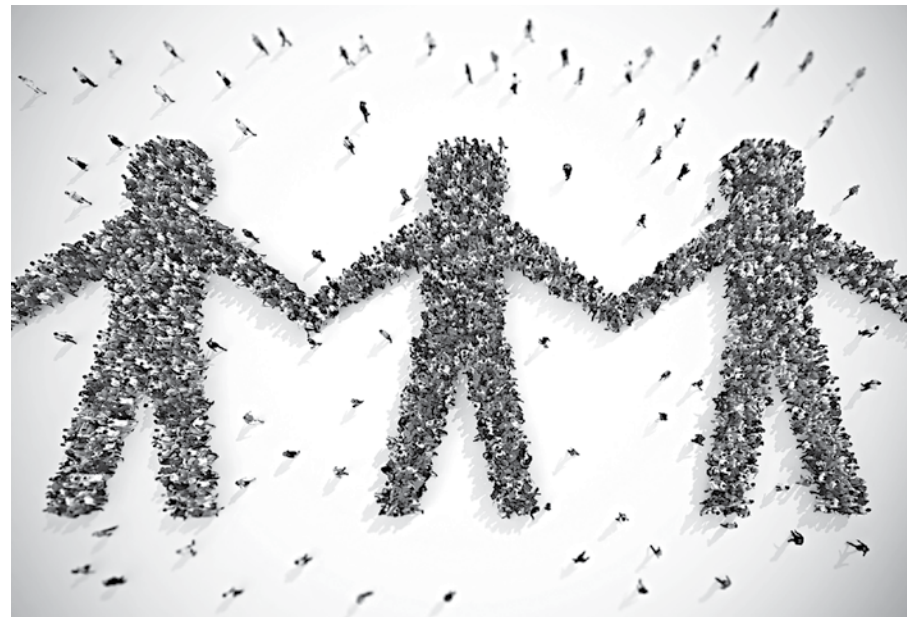
The pandemic has had widespread negative repercussions across Bangladesh, but with vulnerable communities bearing a disproportionate burden of its impacts. As we roll out the nationwide vaccination programme and begin to plan for the post-pandemic recovery, we urge the government to ensure that vulnerable indigenous communities are not left behind. We must not only celebrate our cultural and ethnic diversity on such days, but ensure that minority communities are able to be part of the economic development of the nation while also having their rights and identities respected.

# Why accountability of civil society groups is equally important



MACRO MIRROR  
FAHMIDA KHATUN

A few years back, a reputed non-governmental think tank in Europe saw its sad demise after more than two decades of operation. The organisation gained prominence by working on globally important issues and by attracting a pool of experts from around the world. As a result, it was also able to draw the attention of several donors for funding its activities. Many South Asian experts had the opportunity to work with the organisation. The think tank also successfully brought international policymakers on board while discussing issues that affect larger communities, including the global South. So, the closure



of the organisation was unfortunate. But what was more unfortunate was the reason for the shutdown. It was closed after the revelation of massive financial irregularities of its founding leader—a person who earned fame as an organisation builder and advocate of a just global order. An inquiry into the organisation found that he was taking an abnormally high salary and benefits, paying for personal travels with office funds, and employing relatives in the office without informing the governing body, among many other allegations.

The reason for citing this example is that civil society organisations (CSOs) around the world have a challenge to play their role with integrity and

sincerity. They are under the radar, not only of the government but of everyone else in society as they are engaged in scrutinising the activities of others, particularly policymakers. Clearly, if they are pinpointing limitations of policies and actions of other actors, and suggesting improvements—they themselves have to be on a strong moral footing by being transparent at the highest level.

Bangladesh has a rich history of vibrant CSOs which have come into existence over the years. Broadly, these organisations include policy-oriented think tanks, private development organisations, issue-based advocacy groups, voluntary community-based organisations, and service delivery organisations. The range of their activities is also diverse—these non-governmental, non-profit and non-partisan organisations work on issues that cover economic, social, political, and cultural areas. While promoting various causes in these four broad areas, they focus

on raising awareness on public policies and programmes. They also engage themselves in influencing the design, implementation, and management of public policies and programmes. A large number of such CSOs in Bangladesh are funded by foreign donors.

Some CSOs in Bangladesh have gained good reputations and respect for successfully advocating issues of public interest and diligently following up on the implementation of public policies. However, examples of similar stories of CSOs as mentioned above are not uncommon too. The accountability of CSOs regularly comes under inspection, the findings sometimes leading to a negative image of CSOs. This makes the

task of credible CSOs difficult, particularly at a time when the space for CSOs for undertaking their activities is shrinking.

Activities of CSOs are rarely appreciated by the government of the day. As these organisations raise the appropriateness of certain policies, the effectiveness of actions, the quality of various government services, and flag the issue of governance attached to its initiatives, the government mostly takes a defensive position. At certain points, such a defensive role ends up in imposition of stringent regulations on CSO activities, making it difficult for them to work meaningfully.

The curtailment of the breadth of their work also affects the people for whom they work—the voiceless marginalised people with limited or no opportunity to change their lives for betterment. The broader objective of CSO activities is to have a society based on equity and justice. Therefore, CSO activities are in fact complementary to what the government does. There is no conflict between the objectives of these two actors.

While the space for CSOs to work must be upheld for making development and democracy meaningful and rewarding for each and every citizen of the country, the accountability of CSOs themselves is critically important. Unfortunately, at times there are reports which do not match with the stated objective and spirit of CSOs. The cause for which they fight is absent in many organisations. If CSOs want to make their engagement with policymakers and communities constructive, their own credibility must be established first. Among several issues, the three most important ones are highlighted below.

First, the internal governance of some organisations is weak and designed in a way to serve the interests of the founders and leaders of these CSOs. A lack of robust administrative and governance structure helps to pursue such objectives and change of leadership is extremely rare in several of these organisations. The heads of the institute—usually the founders—hold onto the position for an indefinite or a long period of time as it is perceived to be their right. The excuse given is the absence of any replacement for the position, which is flawed. Of course, there is a shortage of skilled human resources in Bangladesh. Moreover, CSOs are not considered the most sought-after sector among job-seekers. However, there is also less interest among CSOs themselves to find and groom prospective future leaders for the organisation. Sometimes, leadership is transferred to the next generation of family members—just like in private businesses.

In certain organisations, which have attempted to establish a system of

leadership change, the shadow leadership of previous top officials haunts the new leaders as the former continue to interfere in organisational decisions. There is a peculiar system to accommodate the old guard in the mainstream activities of the organisations which undermines independent management and the decision-making process. The idea of taking an advisory role and contributing to the organisation is unusual among CSO leaders.

Second, the lack of a strong financial system gives rise to questions about the financial integrity of some organisations. Audit by reputed firms and independent internal audits are the basic requirements for establishing transparency on financial matters. Organisations sometimes shy away from financial best practices as it might reveal many wrongdoings. Often, salaries and perquisites of the founding and long-lasting leaders are fixed by themselves and at their own will—their taste for high living ignores organisational policies.

Third, the role of the governing bodies of the organisation is also critical. CSOs are usually governed by a board consisting of respected persons in the country. However, at times, the overseeing mechanism does not work well due to low commitment of the board members. Some members only want to be associated with CSOs for self-gratification and name recognition. Some organisations also like to upgrade their image by including big names, but who may not necessarily add real value to the organisation in terms of improving its governance. Ironically, for some organisations, this could be a blessing as they do not want the board to interfere—not only because it can become a pain for the management to run the organisation if the board gets involved in day-to-day affairs, but also because the CSO officials do not want the board to learn about acts which violate the rules. Indeed, maintaining a fine balance between diligently overseeing the governance of the organisation and not interfering in the daily operation of the organisation requires not only skills but also the right attitude of the governing body.

The credibility of an organisation is built over a long period but is destroyed through a small mistake. It sets examples for others. Therefore, CSOs have to continue their arduous journey of advocating for accountable and transparent public policies and programmes by setting good examples for themselves.

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## New due diligence laws: Is Bangladesh ready?



RMG NOTES  
MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

AROUND the world, the issue of human rights due diligence in global supply chains is rapidly rising up the agenda. But what does this mean and how will it impact garment manufacturers in Bangladesh?

For many years, fashion brands and retailers have been implementing their own, internal human rights and corporate social responsibility policies. These are designed to ensure that their garment suppliers and workers are treated fairly, paid appropriate minimum wages and so on.

Yet it has become clear that such policies are proving to be not always effective at addressing key human rights issues. Some fashion brands have very strong CSR policies and collaborate closely with their suppliers, while others are weak in this area. The industry needs a level playing field.

Thus, in the past five years, we have seen a shift towards binding laws around human rights due diligence, both at an individual country level and also at a broader level—such as within the European Union.

Last year, for instance, members of the European Parliament urged the European Union to push forward with rules on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence in EU companies' global supply chains. They called for the EU to join United Nations negotiations for a binding treaty on business and human rights which, they say, "reflects the EU's own assessment that voluntary measures have failed to prevent companies from committing human rights violations and environmental harms, or hold them accountable for harm."

Later this year will see the introduction of legislation on mandatory sustainable

due diligence for companies as part of the EU Commission's 2021 work plan and the European Green Deal.

Individual countries are also acting. The French Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law places the onus on large companies in France to identify and prevent risks to human rights and the environment that could occur as a result of their business activities in supply chains. These activities can include those of the company itself, of their suppliers or subcontractors, of

Slavery Act (the UK's own due diligence legislation for supply chains).

What does this all mean for us as manufacturers?

There are several issues to consider here. Firstly, human rights due diligence legislation will mean that buyers need to become increasingly vigilant as far as supply chains are concerned. I expect a "fight to safety" by which I mean brands and retailers will move toward suppliers that are best in class.



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PHOTO: STAR

companies they control and more. The law, in brief, requires companies to create and implement publicly-available vigilance plans for which they can be held accountable.

It is important to note that fashion brands, our customers, are also supportive of human rights due diligence proposals. Last year, ASOS—a major buyer from Bangladesh—called for the implementation of mandatory human rights due diligence legislation in the UK in order to strengthen the 2015 Modern

The reason for this is that they could potentially face falling foul of the law in their own country—and face hefty fines—if violations are uncovered in their supply chains.

This, in turn, has major implications for RMG suppliers. They will be under increased scrutiny from brands to have systems and processes in place to ensure workers are being properly treated. This includes issues such as health and safety, wages, general worker rights. I expect brands could become increasingly vigilant

in terms of audits to ensure suppliers are meeting expected requirements on these issues. Remember, brands will not want to expose themselves to risk here for it could land them in legal hot water. If there is a risk that a supplier may fail to meet expectations around human rights due diligence, that supplier faces losing out on business—the brand will simply shop elsewhere. That, I believe, is the harsh reality.

The other issue is one of transparency. Transparency is a central mechanism by which the fashion industry is seeking to gain greater control and oversight of global supply chains. In some cases, this means simply having a list of suppliers on their websites (this can be first or second tier suppliers, or sometimes even beyond).

The requirement for due diligence very much ties in with the transparency agenda. In the west, more and more consumers are demanding to know about the conditions in which their garments were made—regular surveys of consumers bear this out. They are shopping with fashion brands which can show them this. Bangladesh has to be ahead of the game on this issue.

I expect the fashion industry to further clamp down on this issue as regulations around due diligence become the norm over the next 18 months.

My takeaway point from all of this is that the RMG sector in Bangladesh should view human rights due diligence regulations as an opportunity to cement our place as a trusted partner of the global fashion sector.

We have made great progress on worker rights and—mentioning no names—I would certainly say some are ahead of most of our competitors in this area. So, let's embrace due diligence regulations as an opportunity to further improve the way we do business on the global stage.

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