

School closures have wreaked havoc on children. We must bounce back.



C OVID-19 is wreaking havoc in Bangladesh, like in the rest of the world, for the last 18 months. There was always a concern that the pandemic would disproportionately affect poorer countries. That is how it is in times of crisis: the

fragility of public institutions becomes more evident, and their shortcomings are laid bare. Amidst the grim struggle between lives and livelihoods, one group in the country has practically fallen off the policy radar: schoolchildren. While public health and hunger are rightfully the most urgent concerns during a pandemic, the current state of education is causing irreversible harm to our country's human capital, damage that will take decades to bounce back from—a ticking bomb, in other words.

All educational institutions have been closed since March of last year. This means, in a few months, children will pass two full grades without having attended a day of school. Of course, school closures do not automatically mean a complete break in learning. Parents and students together have found ways to cope with the crisis, as one would expect. Common alternatives to school learning adopted by families have ranged from the somewhat effective private tutoring and distance learning tools, to the more dubious unsupervised self-studying and help from family members.

A number of problems leap out. First, despite said coping measures, the substantial reduction in time spent on learning activities and the attempt to study outside the learning environment provided by schools are unlikely to compensate for lost school time. Second, all the above mentioned methods mean additional cost burdens for families, be it out-of-pocket costs for distance learning and private tutoring, or the opportunity cost of time spent by parents in teaching. With

mouths to feed during a raging pandemic, poorer families will understandably prioritise earning activities over children's education.

The third issue is the most obvious, and one that we should have foreseen. The notion that alternatives like distance learning tools would miraculously replace mainstream schooling is a pipe dream. Even before the Covid-19 crisis, one in five children of school-going age were out of school. The quality of education the rest were receiving was discouraging. Over half of children aged seven to 14 years did not demonstrate foundational reading skills before the pandemic, and almost three-fourths were found similarly lacking in numeracy skills, according to a 2019 survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in collaboration with UNICEF Bangladesh. The ongoing school closure has only compounded the problem: at least one in four children are at risk of serious learning losses due to the prolonged disruption in education, as found by a recent study by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).

The government appeared to be concerned

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PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

about the potential catastrophe. Immediately after the school closure, the authorities started broadcasting classes for primary and secondary students on national television—a commendable initiative on the surface. The problem, however, was the obvious absence of groundwork needed to properly execute such a measure. Over a third of rural families did not have access to a television. But even among those who had access, very few took those classes, and many who did found the content boring or difficult to follow. As a result, only two and three percent of primary and secondary school students, respectively, were reportedly using the medium.

Thus far, the multiple studies on education in Bangladesh carried out by BIGD over the course of the pandemic indicate three major consequences of school closures: worsening of the existing learning crisis, increasing out-of-pocket costs, and the very real possibility of widening social and economic inequality

in the country. What can we do about it?

To draw attention to this silent learning crisis and to nudge public discourse towards effective, feasible interventions, BIGD brought together some leading international experts in a workshop in July this year. The task at hand was to find satisfactory answers to the following: how do we deliver catchup education to recoup learning losses? How do we ensure last-mile delivery of education without further exacerbating inequality? And finally, how do we minimise dropouts and also provide life opportunities to children who may drop out due to the economic fallout of the pandemic?

First, the government and NGOs alike must consider the stark digital divide when designing technology-based education interventions. To reach the greatest number of children, both advanced and simple technologies are necessary. It might be pre-recorded or live classes over the internet

in some cases; in others, it might be as rudimentary as a text message that delivers and follows up on homework and math problems.

Second, since learning losses are unavoidable during school closure, we should, at the least, be able to identify and measure the learning gaps, so that when children return to school, we can tailor instructions to their appropriate learning level. Third, it is time we delinked learning from schooling. Remedial education during school hours will be unhelpful; students may fall back in their current grade. Thus, after-school remedial classes will be necessary to help students catch up and be on track. The challenge is to make the supplementary content engaging—and not overwhelming—for children. We also need to find creative solutions by exploring all possible delivery methods and by involving the entire education ecosystem, for example, by engaging community volunteers to provide supplementary education.

Finally, there is the looming danger of pandemic-induced dropouts among primary and secondary schoolchildren. Any and all measures that encourage children to stay in school—and parents to send their kids to school—should be explored. This includes incentives like free school meal plans and nutrition programmes. Also, the role of peers in promoting positive learning behaviour among students cannot be overstated. Interventions that emphasise the communal aspect of schools and promote cooperation and help-seeking behaviour among children have been proven effective against rising dropouts.

Rather than being proactive, policies and interventions in poorer countries have historically been reactive. But the Covid-19 crisis has exposed the pitfalls of this approach. Maybe this time, the pandemic will serve as the necessary impetus towards building more resilient institutions for the future.

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Afghan debacle potentially puts UAE on the spot



AFGHANISTAN is showing the United Arab Emirates the downside of being a haven for deposed leaders and exiled politicians whose wealth is reportedly parked without question in Emirati financial institutions.

The latest arrival in the UAE, former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, denied allegations by Afghanistan's ambassador to Tajikistan, Zahir Aghbar, that he had stolen USD 169 million from state coffers, and an assertion by the Russian embassy in Kabul that he had fled with four cars and a helicopter full of cash. There was no independent confirmation of the allegations.

Ashraf Ghani said that after the UAE announced that it was hosting him for "humanitarian" reasons, he had left his country "with one set of traditional clothes, a vest and the sandals" he was wearing. "I was expelled from Afghanistan in such a way that I didn't even get the chance to take my slippers off my feet and pull on my boots." Ghani, a former World Bank official who co-authored a book titled *Fixing Failed States*, said he arrived in the UAE "empty-handed." He was reported to have first gone to Tajikistan before landing in the UAE. Aghbar has denounced the Taliban takeover and pledged allegiance to Ghani's first vice president, Amrullah Saleh. Saleh insists that he remains in office as the legitimate caretaker president and has criticised Ghani for abandoning Afghanistan.

Ashraf Ghani joined a long list of high-profile figures who have sought refuge in the UAE over the years after having either headed governments that were perceived to be corrupt and/or faced charges of corruption themselves. They include siblings Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra, who both served as Thai prime ministers until they were toppled by the military, former Pakistani

president Pervez Musharraf, former Spanish King Juan Carlos, ex-Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan and Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the eldest son of a longtime Yemeni leader who was toppled in the 2011 popular Arab revolts and assassinated several years later.

"For almost two decades now, billions of dollars in corruption proceeds have been funnelled from Afghanistan, a country devastated by four decades of conflict, to Dubai. These outflows have played a part in stunting Afghanistan's economic and political development, facilitating the resurgence of the Taliban, and exacerbating regional

candidate, Ahmad Wali Massoud, whose brother was reported to have flown to the UAE with more than USD 50 million in cash; a senior intelligence official, Adib Ahmad Fahim, whose father was implicated in involvement with the transfer of large sums of money from Afghanistan, and various members of parliament. Fahim's uncle, Haseen, and Karzai's brother were shareholders in Kabul Bank, which was at the centre of a billion-dollar fraud in 2010, much of which was parked in Dubai banks.

The Bureau was careful to emphasise that ownership did not constitute evidence of corruption. The Bureau noted, however, that

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism documented in 2019 ownership of luxury properties in Dubai by a host of prominent Afghans or their relatives.

the UAE's *Al Bayan* newspaper.

To be sure, the Taliban have never sought to export their vision of an Islamic state but their victory encourages militants who do, many of which, like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, are present in Afghanistan.

In addition to the fact that the Afghanistan debacle highlights the need for stricter implementation of anti-money laundering laws, the UAE may feel the need to review its policies as Western nations consider tightening their approach towards aid and cooperation with Middle Eastern, African and Asian countries in the wake of the return of the Taliban.

"The governments and populations we support need to assume ownership and responsibility for the well-being of their country. We need to apply conditionality much more than we have done in the past... If a host government does not play ball—if it is not ready to build strong independent institutions, promote democracy, fight corruption, and respect national and international law—in future, German leaders and their allies should think twice about entering into massive engagements," said Christoph Heusgen, chairman of the Munich Security Conference Foundation Circle. He was Germany's ambassador to the United Nations until June of this year.

Heusgen, as well as Jean-Marie Guéhenno, a member of a board that advises UN Secretary-General António Guterres on mediation, have suggested that Europe should review its involvement in other conflict zones such as the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia.

The UAE has focused on Somalia and the breakaway republic of Somaliland with the creation of military bases and management of ports as part of its bid to project influence in the Horn of Africa and counter Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

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Ashraf Ghani, pictured on August 4.

PHOTO: AFP

instability," a report published last year by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concluded.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism documented in 2019 ownership of luxury properties in Dubai by a host of prominent Afghans or their relatives. Among those identified by the Bureau were family members of former presidents Hamid Karzai and Burhanuddin Rabbani; a presidential

"concerns have been mounting generally about alleged corruption among some senior Afghan officials. Few, if any, of the properties appear to have been declared on official registers, as is required by Afghanistan's often ignored and broadly ineffective anti-corruption rules."

Maira Matini of Transparency International concurred at the time. "This doesn't mean that those officials are corrupt. However, it does

raise red flags and needs to be investigated by the authorities," she said.

While in office, Ghani ordered an investigation into allegations of embezzlement by Ghulam Farooq Wardak, when he was education minister. Wardak was identified by the Bureau as owning, together with his wife, two luxury properties in Dubai. The investigation, conducted by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), reportedly found evidence of embezzlement and inaccurate data records on the number of schools that enabled diversion of donor funds. Wardak denied the allegations.

Of all the exiles in the UAE, Ashraf Ghani most represents the risks of facilitating the movement of funds that potentially may have been acquired through corruption. Massive corruption in Afghanistan is what partly returned the Taliban to power. If so, looking the other way at the influx of corrupt funds has helped empower the kind of group against which the UAE has been on the warpath for more than a decade: Islamists who reject a separation of politics and religion.

"Terrorist groups may use (Afghanistan) as a base if global powers cannot negotiate with the Taliban on (the transition of power) quickly," warned columnist Yousef al-Sharif in

QUOTABLE Quote

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
(1818 – 1895)
American abolitionist and writer

To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Scout's base
- 5 Insurance agent's number
- 10 Lewd look
- 11 Dawn goddess
- 12 Yen
- 13 Nursery item
- 14 Old West cemetery
- 16 Flashy 1940s attire
- 20 Hardens
- 23 CEO's deg.
- 24 Tom's aunt
- 25 Had aspirations
- 27 Money machine
- 28 Forces out of bed
- 29 Tug sound
- 32 Float ingredient

DOWN

- 1 Iron, for one
- 2 Flying: Prefix
- 3 "Never Let—" (Kazuo Ishiguro novel)
- 4 Knotty snack
- 5 Bee product
- 6 Russian range
- 7 Alley —
- 8 Number after due
- 9 Lobed organ
- 11 Baja "Bye!"
- 15 Sacred

17 Diamond workers

18 Sceptic's comment

19 Young ones

20 Petty fight

21 Dog in a 1939 film

22 Sailors' saint

25 Owl call

26 Beats at the auction

28 Spacious

30 Court event

31 Sightseeing trips

33 Fix text

34 Singer Fitzgerald

35 Depend

36 Grammys category

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	G	E	C	O	P	A
C	R	A	T	E	C	O	N
R	E	L	A	X	A	L	E
U	N	O	P	I	R	A	T
M	A	R	L	I	N	S	W
S	E	A	R	S	L	O	S
D	E	U	C	E			
S	H	Y	L	E	A	D	S
A	H	A	Y	A	N	K	E
R	A	N	G	E	R	S	B
O	R	G	A	N	O	S	A
S	E	E	M	S	R	A	T
E	R	R	S		P	E	R