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School reopening strategy must prioritise health and safety

Have schools been given enough guidance in that regard?

AFTER around 18 months of closure, the fact that schools and colleges are finally on the path to opening up is a positive development. When the announcement to reopen on September 12 was made by Education Minister Dipu Moni on Friday, she said the authorities had made all arrangements for reopening, and that they would strictly monitor whether health and safety protocols were being properly implemented and maintained at educational institutions.

While we fully support the long overdue resumption of education, we are concerned to see that schools and colleges have been given barely 10-days' notice about the resumption of in-person classes. According to officials from both education ministries, examinees of this year's four public examinations will attend classes every day after the reopening, whereas students of other classes will have in-person classes once or twice every week. But what about the conditions of these classrooms, which have been abandoned for almost 1.5 years? How clean are the buildings and the facilities? Are any of the utilities, like electric lines or water pipes, in need of repair?

During a meeting on Thursday, the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 recommended reopening schools in phases—and despite the reduction in Covid-19 infection rates, it stressed on the importance of mandatory mask-wearing, socially distanced seating in classrooms, and clean washrooms with arrangements for washing hands with soap. The director of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) also said recently that students' body temperature would be screened before allowing them to enter classrooms. While such directives are commendable, we wonder how schools with limited funds and space will implement them without specific and planned interventions by the government.

According to a report in this daily, several education ministry officials said they would be able to prepare a final guideline on reopening schools by this week. However, that leaves schools with less than a week at hand to make arrangements to follow this final guideline properly. Given that these schools are now faced with the daunting task of making up for the learning loss of millions of students, we would not be amiss to suggest that this guideline should have been prepared well in advance and shared with schools and colleges well before setting a date for starting in-person classes. From the very beginning, experts have suggested that simply reopening schools is not enough—there must be a comprehensive teaching-learning plan to compensate for learning losses, and special focus should be given to children from marginalised backgrounds, possibly with the help of NGOs and community organisations. So far, it is unclear whether any of these suggestions have been incorporated into the strategy for reopening schools and colleges.

The authorities must ensure that this reopening is not done in a haphazard manner that will ultimately put students and their families at risk. The ministries of education have had more than a year to plan for this. The return to education must be part of a well thought out strategy that places the health and safety of our students at its very centre, while ensuring that their transition back to education and their recovery from learning losses is a smooth process.

Counterfeit medicine

The menace continues

SEVEN persons from different parts of the city were arrested for selling spurious drugs, some of which are used in ICU and CCU units of hospitals. Using these counterfeit drugs amount to virtual murder of the patients and, as such, those indulging in them should be tried for murder. The seven arrested represent the tip of the iceberg and a far more frightening story lies behind it.

We have been reporting on fake drugs over a long time, but curiously and alarmingly, nothing much has happened. From manufacturing, storing, distributing and finally selling by pharmacies, the chain is long and the participants in this deadly business are many. The first three in this chain may not be easy to find, but they can definitely be traced if the efforts are sincere. The pharmacies, who have fixed establishment, must be held accountable and forced to play a far greater part in stopping this business than they do now. A pharmacy should be able to identify a fake medicine from a good one and hence should refuse to sell them. There appears to be an obvious nexus that the police can easily break, if they want to.

However, the biggest role needs to be played by the Directorate General of Drug Administration, the principal authority responsible for assuring safety of all drugs sold to the people. The office is headed by a director general, with several directors and a staff of 370. It also has 7 division based offices with 55 staff. The question is, how can they operate more effectively?

This institution needs to serve the public better. Reasons for failure are lack of will, proper strategy and determination to carry out its mandate. There is also the absence of monitoring by the higher authorities concerned as to how this vital institution can function better. Numerous media reports have unearthed serious instances of corruption in this field. There are alleged cases of collusion between spurious drug producers and the monitoring authorities which have mysteriously gone without investigation. There are also allegations that some life-saving drugs are deliberately withheld from the open market and sold in the black market at three or four times the price with the full knowledge of the people concerned.

The health ministry and the home ministry should jointly launch effective drives against the producers, distributors and the sellers of adulterated drugs. The concerned ministry should also investigate the activities of the relevant bodies and put a stop to this murderous trade of counterfeit medicines. It's time the Anti-Corruption Commission took a serious look into this public interest issue.

Building a better world after the pandemic

Can B3W, backed by the US, beat its rival BRI?

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

UNDER the current global configuration, the roles played by the two rival superpowers USA and China will be pivotal not only in the geopolitical sphere, but their respective strengths will also determine the trajectory of trade patterns, economic hegemony, and world power alignment. China, despite being a latecomer on the world stage, has caught up fast and is now giving the USA (and its partners) a run for their money. China's BRI programme launched in 2013 to support economic development in middle- and low-income countries generated a lot of heart-burn in G7 circles and now will be met head-on by the West's new B3W initiative.

At their summit in June this year, the G7 leaders launched a global infrastructure development programme known as Build Back Better World (B3W) which aims to generate USD 40 trillion worth of infrastructure investment needed by developing countries by 2035. Led by the US, the B3W Partnership plans to catalyse funding for quality infrastructure from the private sector and will encourage investments that support "climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality," according to the Fact Sheet released by the White House. The name B3W is a play on Biden's frequently used slogan to promote improving infrastructure at home.

From the get-go, the sponsors made it clear that the B3W initiative was an attempt to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China stepped in to support infrastructure projects in Asia and Africa and is investing USD 50-100 billion annually on power, ports, roads, bridges, and railroads. More than 60 countries, including the G7 member Italy, have expressed interest in working with China on BRI. Morgan Stanley has predicted China's overall expenses over the life of the BRI could reach USD 1.2-1.3 trillion by 2027. Western leaders have promoted B3W as a form of "strategic competition with China".

So, here we have two competing global programmes, one funded by China, and the other spearheaded by the US with G7 backing, which have similar objectives. While the B3W programme is at the starting line, it might catch up with the eight-year-old BRI if the promises made by the G7 leaders are fulfilled. Countries in the African, Asian, and Latin American regions face a yearly infrastructure financing shortfall of over USD 2-3 trillion dollars, according to an earlier UNCTAD estimate. Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates show that infrastructure projects in only a few countries in South Asia including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh could easily soak up billions of additional dollars. The total annual excess demand in ADB countries is nearly USD 800 billion.

All this competition between the two economic giants to invest in developing countries is good news, but as they say in economics, "there ain't no such thing as a free lunch". For both the donor and the recipient there are costs, as well as benefits. Why would China or the US want to build infrastructure or support the West voiced concern that Pakistan's partnership with China has left the former critically in debt, and it might be soon handing over its ports, particularly Gwadar, and other infrastructure to China, replicating the Sri Lanka scenario.

According to a survey published last year by the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, European firms have been hesitant to participate in BRI projects mainly due to a lack of information and transparency. The Chamber requested that China create an open procurement system as well as perform feasibility and impact studies for BRI projects. The World Bank and other bodies have also called for increased transparency.

Notably, many of the areas targeted by China suffer from underinvestment due to domestic economic struggles, and they

Joe Biden with Xi Jinping during a visit to Beijing in 2011. PHOTO: AFP

the security, trade, or environmental goals of emerging nations? As we saw after the Second World War, when the US and Russia attempted to carve out their own zones of influence, their rivalry led to armed conflicts, debt and destitution for some countries, and often a toxic international climate devoid of any goodwill between neighbouring countries.

A question on everyone's mind is: "which programme is better?" How should a country decide whether to go with B3W or BRI? And in the long run, can the world be a better place with both programmes competing for customers, or would the rivalry bring ruin for the host countries? A few years ago, after China signed a 99-year lease on a Sri Lankan port at Hambantota, analysts warned that another major BRI partner, Pakistan, could be facing a debt-crisis. Media in often register low on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). Myanmar and Pakistan—two countries heavily targeted by the BRI—rank 148th and 150th globally in terms of HDI.

Regardless of their respective strengths and weaknesses, if BRI and B3W programmes complement each other, the world that emerges after the pandemic can be a better one. Economic trade theory suggests that new and improved infrastructure may lead to more trade and increased welfare. However, oftentimes these roads and bridges are underutilised and there "is increasing evidence of malinvestment in previous Chinese infrastructure investments, rising corporate debt and corruption." There is no guarantee that B3W will do any better. The borrowing countries might find themselves struggling with financial and economic crises.

Trade brings about winners and losers within a country and unless there is adequate redistribution of the gains within an economy, it can lead to increased inequality, poverty and structural unemployment. BRI critics also point out that, "there are negative consequences to the environment that trade expansion may bring about unless effective legal, political and economic institutions are in place addressing the issue." As can be expected, champions of B3W are promoting it as a "green BRI"!

There are some differences between the two programmes. BRI's focus is on strategic infrastructure such as ports, and most expenditure to date has been on transport and power. The B3W, meanwhile, will focus on climate, health, digital technology, and gender equity and equality. The USA has tended to provide funds for large projects in large countries, as compared to China, which has funded smaller projects in developing countries. B3W might also provide a boost for democracy and force China to pay greater attention to raising its standards on human rights.

The success of B3W will depend on how the programme is structured. The initiative will need to work with "multiple governments and mobilise multiple sources of private capital, a slower and messier approach than BRI's bilaterally negotiated, largely state-funded projects."

Details of how the G7 plan will be financed remains unclear. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the group was not yet at a stage to release financing for its initiative.

A final word. Biden and his allies might need to corral all their resources and put their money where their mouth is, to boost B3W. The US and its democratic partners in G7 got a hard knock after the debacle in Afghanistan. Under the headline "Withdrawal Shuffles Global Power Order", the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on September 1 that "Beijing couldn't contain its glee at what it described as the humiliation of its main global rival." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week that Russia was "not gloating" about the US defeat in Afghanistan, but it's obvious they are not sad. Now the USA and its allies can do what trillions of dollars squandered on armaments could not achieve—use B3W to tilt or realign the global balance of power back in their favour.

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Bank accounts for domestic workers may solve many problems

MOHAMMAD KAZI MAMUN

SOME days ago, an elderly woman came to my office to open a bank account for her domestic help. Besides a monthly salary, she planned to deposit a fixed amount every month to ensure that her domestic help had a lump sum amount in her bank account after retirement. The woman was unaware of the nitty gritty of the modern banking world. Nevertheless, her intentions were noble.

The opening of an account, however, was not easy. When questioned about the purpose of the bank account, the woman shared a sad story with her banker. She reached a verbal agreement with a man before employing a young girl. The woman had to confirm a monthly payment to her father, besides arranging food, lodging and clothing for the girl. The poor girl has apparently been used as an income generating tool by her father, who had in the meantime fathered another three children. Now, as the girl is about to reach adulthood, she is legally entitled to take her own income and employment decisions. It is with that in mind that the woman came to the bank.

The Domestic Help Protection and Welfare Policy of Bangladesh—approved in 2015—requires registration and service contracts for all domestic workers. It instructs the Ministry of Labour and Employment to provide domestic workers access to the welfare fund created for their financial assistance, insurance and scholarship. However, since the policy is yet to be implemented, the domestic workers' entitlement to the fund is not legally enforceable.

"She loves us the way she loves her bidet."—this was the assessment of a maid about her employer drawn in the famous drama of Jean Genet called, "The Maids". This rather one-sided view has gained even more ground in the age of lockdown. A woman who had taken care of a family round the clock …suddenly discovered the gate of her employer's house was locked.

The workers of our RMG sector, whose minimum wage is set at USD 94 per month against the international standard of USD 188, are considered one of the most vulnerable groups in the world. However, a survey conducted by the National Domestic Women Workers Union revealed that a more vulnerable class exists among the domestic workers of Bangladesh, who on average earn USD 59 a month. According to a 2011 study done by the Domestic Workers Rights Network, around two million domestic workers are engaged in our houses—a major portion of them being young girls from poor families. The live-in house maids of Bangladesh appear unique in the world, since they play almost all roles a house can demand. They work as house keepers, nannies, cooks, cleaners, patient's attendants, gardeners, and more. The government could make the opening of bank accounts mandatory. Bangladesh adopted its National Social Security Strategy in 2015, making provisions for a good number of social security allowances, domestic workers remain beyond its radar.

In Bangladesh, there is still no formal market for domestic workers. Though many online recruiting agencies have recently mushroomed, complaints of cheating abound. Due to the immense poverty prevailing in many parts of our country, many domestic helps seek some sort of shelter in the house of their comparatively rich relatives, neighbours or friends. Many of our houses act as an informal training centre for the domestic workers.

In 2016, the Bangladesh government launched its Overseas Employment Policy to safeguard the rights of migrant workers. However, government policy still lags behind when it comes to protecting the rights of domestic workers. For example, the Domestic Servants' Registration Ordinance, 1961, is there to protect the employers, not workers. Domestic work, which has been recognised as a profession by our labour law, is yet to be properly formalised.

Shifting the informal market of domestic workers to an organised one is not easy. And a forced transformation might lead to a disaster.

The government could make the opening of bank accounts mandatory unless the market for domestic help gets matured enough. The bank account could be opened with a letter from the employer, stipulating the terms of employment, including salary, leave, etc. As a result, a reliable database could be built for domestic workers. Since girls or boys from the age of 12 years can be engaged under the policy, a special minor account in this regard may be approved by the Bangladesh Bank. This could help solve many of the problems we have when it comes to this sector.

In Bangladesh, there is still no formal market for domestic workers. PHOTO: COLLECTED

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