

Is the social safety net becoming a bottomless pit?

The government must fix poor targeting and unplanned deployment to make it work better

IT'S a classic case of contradictions central to how Bangladesh approaches its major problems. The country, according to a new report, has a commendable social safety net programme on paper, with substantial allocations that place it among the top four countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To that effect, the government spends more than Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, China and others in terms of the share of GDP. Yet, like many other centrally undertaken pro-people interventions, the social safety net programme suffers from myriad challenges that have the effect of cancelling out its benefits, making it all but cosmetic.

The report, unveiled by the World Bank on Thursday, offers an insight into what's keeping the programme from delivering expected results. It identifies poor targeting and unplanned deployment among the major roadblocks to success. The targeting problem has various components. For example, 49-66 percent of the beneficiaries of allowance and food support programmes in Bangladesh are not poor, the report says citing the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. The implication of this is not difficult to comprehend: the inclusion of so many undeserved beneficiaries can only mean the exclusion of so many deserved beneficiaries, which is a frightening thought. In some cases, the problem of poor targeting results in areas with higher poverty rates receiving less coverage than areas with lower poverty incidence. Reallocating existing transfers to the poorest could reduce poverty by 24 percent, the report says. It also underscores the gap between urban and rural populations and different risk groups in terms of the benefits received. Although rebalancing geographic allocations (with a greater focus on the urban poor) and using a comprehensive social registry could help identify the most deserved beneficiaries, the lack of flexibility, coordination and accountability in the system means that these problems persist.

The delivery/deployment problem is another major challenge. A huge number of poor beneficiaries could benefit from the programme if its resources were deployed properly and fast. For example, according to the World Bank report, central allocations for the Food for Work programme were released relatively fast, but delays of up to 100 days were noted between receipt of funds, project approval, implementation and payments. This is unacceptable. Ideally, if the multiplicity of steps in the process could be cut down, it wouldn't take more than 10 days to transfer funds from the treasury to the beneficiaries. We are told that digitising the payment system is on the cards, and that by June next year, all social safety net payments would be done through the government-to-person scheme. We only hope that this will be done as planned and with the urgency it deserves.

The pandemic has exposed the underbelly of our social safety net programme like nothing else in the past. It has pushed many new categories of people into poverty and many existing poor into further destitution, which calls for a system that is robust, efficient and adaptive. Even though the government announced a number of schemes to help them, the benefits of those have eluded the most vulnerable because of the lack of proper planning and execution, as well as corruption. We urge the government to take the World Bank report seriously and implement its recommendations.

Take proper action to stop dengue spread

Precaution is everyone's responsibility, but enforcing preventive measures is the authorities' job

THE reports of dengue infections have been increasing at a worrying rate, and new data shows that the disease has started to spread beyond Dhaka, which has been the dengue hotspot for the past few months. According to the health directorate, at least 14,831 dengue cases have been reported in Bangladesh between January 1 and September 15 this year. Of those cases, 1,601—around 10.79 percent—were reported outside Dhaka. But of the 307 dengue cases reported in the 24 hours between Tuesday and Wednesday, 63 patients—20.52 percent—were not in the capital.

The surge in the cases that Bangladesh is seeing now is similar to what Dhaka experienced in the last few months, which means dengue is spreading across the country alarmingly. If this trend is allowed to continue, experts fear that the rest of the country may face a situation similar to Dhaka's by mid-October.

According to LGRD Minister Md Tazul Islam, most patients from outside Dhaka were infected when they visited the capital. That could have been prevented if, as entomologist Dr Saifur Rahman suggested while speaking to *The Daily Star*, intense fogging had been conducted in and around major bus stations in Dhaka and inside public transport vehicles themselves.

Given that dengue cases are just beginning to rise outside Dhaka, the authorities concerned still have some time to put preventive measures in place and stop the situation from getting worse. There's plenty to learn from our past experiences of dengue outbreaks—some of which were very recent.

We urge authorities to act fast in preventing the spread of dengue. Raising awareness among the citizens and urging them to adopt preventive measures—i.e. wearing clothes that cover most of their skin, cleaning up stagnant water regularly, using insecticides and mosquito nets, etc.—are certainly crucial. But the authorities themselves have the responsibility to prevent the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes, which include spraying (effective) larvicides in dengue hotspots, carrying out regular fogging, and keeping the water bodies of their respective areas clean.

Because of the seasonal nature of dengue infections, we hope that the city corporation and municipality authorities in the urban areas and the union and upazila parishads in the rural areas have taken adequate preparations to prevent Aedes breeding. Our healthcare system is already overwhelmed with Covid patients; the authorities need to do what they must, while there's still time, to contain dengue infections to avoid putting more burden on the healthcare providers.

With Covid, there's no easing back into campus

Undertaking this mammoth task requires a comprehensive strategy



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IT is as refreshing as watching flowers of urban forestry in bloom or the roadside plants glisten after a bout of rain.

Children in their uniforms, heading to their schools, have brought back memories of a life that came to a standstill for over 18 months. A little boy with a school bag and a water bottle, hugging his dad from the back on a motorbike, a sleeping girl in her mother's arm under a rickshaw hood, or a caregiver feeding a restless child breakfast in a speeding car—all this is a morning vista that we greatly missed. In the last year and a half, my niece grew up and became a teenager; her teacher could hardly recognise her when she returned to school. It was quite an emotional reunion, from what I hear.

The institutions are starting to be abuzz with life. The tiny masks worn by our young ones, however, remind us that not everything is normal. And to minimise the physical stay in the compound, many schools are offering half of their classes online. Hybrid learning is the new absolute.

The Ministry of Education has always maintained that they would not reopen schools unless the infection rate dropped under 10 percent, adding that they would not hesitate to shut down if there was any sign of a viral spike. It is a prudent decision. The parents, too, are cautious, as suggested by the low turnout in schools. If the rise and fall of the viral curve is any indicator—that, too, based on only those who have volunteered to be tested—the cautiousness of the students and their parents is also understandable. They need complete assurance that their children will be in a protected environment. The reality is we are far from an ideal situation where we can claim normalcy.

At my university, ULAB, we conducted a survey to assess the vaccination status as well as the student preference for online/in-person classes. While most of our teachers and staff are vaccinated, only one-third of our students have been able to get the jabs. The absence of national ID cards seems to be a hindrance; only recently, the option of birth certificates and a dedicated link for university students have been introduced. Priorities have been given to medical students and public universities with residential dorms;

private universities like ours did not make the cut. If our students manage to avail themselves of this lately given window of opportunity, we expect two-thirds of our students to receive at least one dose of the vaccine by the end of this month, when we are supposed to resume face-to-face learning.

The rate of being infected after two doses throws another spanner in the works. There is a three-way split among our students: 39.7 percent are comfortable in continuing classes online, 33 percent want to return to physical classrooms, while 27.3 percent have no preference. Given the adversity aired against online teaching, it is interesting to see how an age-old system of in-class lecturing can undergo a serious revision with the advent of the new.

Another interesting find in the survey was that almost all students would move to Dhaka once the campus reopened, which means even if we adopt a hybrid or a blended model, our students from outside of Dhaka (about 25 percent) would like to relocate. This is understandable as universities are required to hold exams and laboratory classes in a physical setting.

There is no clear-cut solution to the imbroglio that we are facing. To adopt a hybrid model—where teachers will be streaming classes with half of their students present in the classroom, with the remaining half in their homes—will need massive investments. All classes will need high-resolution cameras and microphones, and teachers will be required to have basic training on addressing two different audiences at the same time. Such a model will allow the university administrations to control the crowd: for example, the odd roll numbers attending the Sunday slots, while the even roll numbers coming in on Tuesdays.

This is an example of a hybrid model where face-to-face and online activities are integrated. In a blended learning model, class sessions are mostly held in traditional classrooms with the online platforms used for activities, lecture sharing, and assessment. With just weeks to go before the reopening, the government directives for universities have been very flexible. It has asked the academic council and syndicate concerned to decide on the teaching modalities.

As the split in our survey shows, the situation is unlikely to yield any consensus. We will need decisive actions. The government's vaccination programme is directly linked with the campus visit policies. For instance, as an institution,

can we declare a campus policy that says "no vaccine, no entry"? We submitted the list of our registered students in February, but only last week did we have the introduction of a university vaccination service. We cannot bar students from entering their campus. We can always endorse basic health protocols, such as wearing masks, using sanitisers, checking temperature, classroom airflow, and disinfection of public places. Then again,

strategy is required. Leaving it to the local authority or agency will mean that each institution will set its own bar: some will lower the net to play tennis, while others will set it so high that it will be unrealistic. The country is already experiencing a digital divide where the access to and the affordability of procuring technological devices and the internet have been an issue. The pandemic has exposed the gap between developed



We want to see our universities come alive with the chatters and laughter of students—like Bottola in Dhaka University—again, but not in a haphazard manner that jeopardises their lives and learning.

FILE PHOTO: HASAN MAHMUD PROTTOY

who will bear these additional expenses? What will be our protocol for a "panic shutdown" if there is a rise in the number of infections? We have already seen a similar instance in the US.

The key challenge in reopening our institutions and adapting to a new model is making sure that all our students have the same experience. We cannot have one set of teaching/learning experiences or assessments for one group of students, while another set of experiences for the others. How can we ensure that, outside our protected area, the students are moving with similar health and safety standards? The public bus in which a student is travelling may not have the luxury of our spaced-out classroom seating arrangements. To what extent can we police our students in maintaining health protocols? Is that a reminder of the Bangla idiom of a tight bundle with a loose knot?

I believe that a comprehensive

and developing countries, urban and rural populations, young and educated versus older and less-educated individuals, public and private, and men and women. One consequence of the digital divide is isolation, which can cause psychological disorders. Gender discrimination is another issue as parents prefer investing more in the education of a male child than that of a female one. It is important that we go back to the campuses to bridge these gaps.

In an ideal world, we would like to see the campuses and compounds filled with the liveliness of our students, freed from their screen times and Zoom boxes. We would like to get involved in activities that will hone their social skills and practical knowledge. But letting the policy balloon fly at the last second with a lot of holes in it is sure to spoil the party.

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The great 'tamasha' of California recall election



ASHEFAQUE SWAPAN

IT was a political circus almost as outsized as America's largest state: California.

This was a recall election where the result should have been a foregone conclusion—and in the end, it was. California

Governor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, ran a robust campaign to turn the election into a cakewalk in this overwhelmingly Democratic state.

But not before he spent some sleepless nights, and the state went through the sort of drama that would make a soap opera screenwriter blush.

First, let's have a quick primer on that odd political confection: the California recall system. A legacy of the progressive tradition of direct democracy, California has a relatively low threshold of petitioners that can trigger a vote to recall a governor.

A lofty idea, perhaps, but it has more holes than a piece of Swiss cheese. Take this year's gubernatorial recall election. A voter had to make two choices. The first was whether you want to recall (read "sack") the current governor. If you don't, then the governor gets to keep his job. End of story.

But if you do, then things get weird. In that case, anyone who wins a plurality among a colourful assortment of candidates—this year there were 46—wins. I am not joking. So hypothetically, even if 49 percent voters vote for keeping the governor (which means 51 percent don't and he/she has to go), anybody among her/his opponents with a plurality—Newsom's opponent Larry Elder won 38 percent at last count—gets to oust him.

Another wrinkle in the mix—which gave the Democrats a real fright this time around—is that a recall election is often a one-off effort with very low turnout. Important Democratic constituents like the minorities and young people are notoriously inconsistent voters.

In the end, however, the Republican-

fevered dreams never did pan out—nobody's surprise. But before I elaborate on that, let's take a quick recap on how this recall circus came about.

Like most of the awful things that are happening around the world during this terrible time, it was the pandemic that almost cost Newsom his job. California was hit hard by the pandemic, and Newsom's tough restrictive mandates made many voters chafe. What's worse, while he imposed draconian restrictions,

ago. President Joe Biden trounced former President Donald Trump last year by a whopping 29 points.

Republicans likely wistfully looked back at the last time California tried to recall a governor and succeeded. In 2003, just like in one of his "Terminator" movies, macho movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger appeared to come out of nowhere and beat sitting Democratic Governor Gray Davis.

Things have changed since then. The

Trump-like candidate who basks in riling up the base: a doomed strategy in a state where Republicans are so outnumbered.

CNN reports that Elder has said that "the ideal minimum wage is USD 0.00." He once called climate change "a crock," argued slave owners should receive reparations, and opposed mandating masks or vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic. He has also written that "women know less than men." Good luck winning California with that.

Yet, the fact of the matter is that in the summer, polls did show that the recall vote could be close. Newsom hauled in a torrent of campaign cash and simply drowned the airwaves. Republicans, for all the noise they made, failed to convince donors with deep pockets to back them.

There is also a rather Trumpian twist in all this. The former president continues to cast a long shadow on the party, which is utterly in thrall with his brand of toxic, take-no-prisoners, own-the-libs politics. In California, that's poison.

Elder helped Newsom frame the election as a choice between him and a Trump clone that helped galvanise Democratic voters. The lopsided Democratic advantage did the rest.

In the end, voters backed Newsom for stoutly defending robust measures to battle Covid-19. More than 67,000 Californians have died in the pandemic, and despite the Republican attacks, Newsom has stood firm, and California has one of the nation's highest vaccination rates and lowest rate of new virus cases.

"It appears that we are enjoying an overwhelmingly 'no' vote tonight here in the state of California, but 'no' is not the only thing that was expressed tonight," a jubilant Newsom told reporters on September 14.

"We said yes to science. We said yes to vaccines. We said yes to ending this pandemic. We said yes to people's right to vote without fear of fake fraud and voter suppression. We said yes to women's fundamental constitutional right to decide for herself what she does with her body, her fate, her future. We said yes to diversity."

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California Governor Gavin Newsom makes an appearance after the polls close on the recall election, at the California Democratic Party headquarters in Sacramento, California, US on September 14, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

he was caught schmoozing—maskless—in a party in one of the most expensive restaurants in California named French Laundry (I'm still scratching my head about that name).

Angry voters organised, and conservative media and the Republican Party were only too happy to egg them on.

At first glance, you may be wondering: What on earth were Republicans thinking? In California, Democrats outnumber Republicans by a margin of 2-1; Democrats have a supermajority in the legislature, and the last time Republicans won a statewide race was over a decade

ago. President Joe Biden trounced former President Donald Trump last year by a whopping 29 points. Republicans likely wistfully looked back at the last time California tried to recall a governor and succeeded. In 2003, just like in one of his "Terminator" movies, macho movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger appeared to come out of nowhere and beat sitting Democratic Governor Gray Davis. Things have changed since then. The

state is far more Democratic, and while Davis was very unpopular, Newsom is not. The key difference, however, is the diametrically opposite political strategy to unseat the governor. In 2003, Schwarzenegger hewed to a moderate, localised political message—his focus was on a widely loathed vehicle tax. (The fact that he was a celebrity didn't hurt—this is, after all, the land of Hollywood.)