

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 22, 2021, ASHWIN 7, 1428 BS

The problem with the reckless use of antibiotics

A Chattogram study finds majority of people, including newborns, resistant to antibiotics

WE are deeply concerned about the findings of a recent study—funded by the Research and Publication Office of the University of Chittagong, and supported by the Disease Biology and Molecular Epidemiology Research Group, Chittagong—which revealed that overuse and misuse of antibiotics have caused resistance in people of all age groups in the port city. The study was conducted on 1,000 patients from two Chattogram hospitals, around half of whom were children, between 2018 and 2020. The ineffectiveness of antibiotics is such that 47 percent of the infants and children were found to be infected by at least three types of antibiotic-resistant germs. Additionally, 40 percent of participants aged 15 years and above showed resistance to at least three antibiotic drugs, while 70 percent of the participants were resistant to at least one antibiotic.

While the participants of the study were all from Chattogram, considering the tendency of Bangladeshis to self-prescribe antibiotics and other medicines—and the carelessness with which these drugs are sold by many unlicensed pharmacies across the country—one may not be wrong to assume that the situation is similar in the rest of the country. The research found that such resistance can be passed down from mothers to their children. Other major causes include patients getting infected by antibiotic-resistant pathogens in hospitals, irrational use of antibiotics without doctors' prescription/advice, and through the consumption of dairy and poultry products laced with antibiotics.

The researchers of the study emphasised regular monitoring and clinical detection of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and their plasmids—specific genetic structures—to prevent public health disasters. Otherwise, they fear the treatment of children using antibiotics will be nearly impossible in the future.

Again, there can be no denying of the haphazard manner in which major medicines such as antibiotics are sold over the counter in Bangladesh. But the findings of the Chattogram study confirm that it is high time to put a stop to this culture. The people of the country must be made aware of the dangers of consuming antibiotics unless they have been prescribed by a licensed doctor. Additionally, legitimate pharmacies must practise selling such drugs to people only at the reference of a doctor. We hope that steps will be taken by the authorities to not only find ways around such resistance when treating patients, but to also crack down heavily on the reckless retail of antibiotics.

Why is our public transport in decline?

The authorities should focus on creating an efficient and affordable public transport system

A planned public transport system is not only the best way to ease traffic congestion and ensure safer roads, but can also contribute to reducing energy consumption, decreasing air pollution and fighting climate change. Across the world, experts continue to advocate for the use of public transport as a strategy to improve public health, reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and create a more functional society.

Yet, in Bangladesh, we are witnessing a sharp decline in the numbers of buses and minibuses. What's even more worrying is that, according to the data from Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the number of private cars and minibuses have started to increase again this year. Only 1,075 buses and 220 minibuses have been registered so far this year, as opposed to 9,470 cars and a whopping 198,000 motorcycles. This is despite the fact that small vehicles, including motorcycles, have routinely been identified by road safety advocates as one of the major causes of accidents—which have gone up by 40 percent in the first seven months of this year, compared to the same period last year.

Why is Bangladesh taking this backward step, when most countries in the world are moving towards public transport-oriented commuting systems? According to experts, a lack of coordinated planning and policies is the main reason behind this state of affairs. Past decisions taken by the authorities—such as reduction of motorcycle registration fees, and the provision for easy car loans—have contributed towards the situation as well. We are confused as to why such incentives are being provided towards private transport, while the route permits for buses have been suspended for a long time, when all the data suggests that a greater use of public transport and footpaths would be the most beneficial for Bangladeshi citizens—both in terms of efficiency and affordability.

As there is little scope for increasing road space in the capital, we urge our policymakers to prioritise planned public transport instead. Experts have suggested revamping the BRTC bus service, introducing bus franchise systems, and prioritising the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) services. Most importantly, the plans for bus route rationalisation to bring Dhaka's chaotic bus operations under control must be implemented without further delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Interns deserve fair treatment

In Bangladesh, millions of graduates are struggling to get jobs because they lack experience. Many organisations help with enhancing the job seekers' experience through internships, but most of them don't pay the interns at all, although they work almost full-time. There should be a proper policy to pay the interns.

Mohammad Yasin Islam
Student, Jagannath University

The empty seats in our classrooms

What can we do to ensure that school dropouts don't increase as a result of the pandemic?



SHUPROVA TASNEM

AFTER 543 days of school closure, one of the most protracted education gaps in the world that was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the children of Bangladesh finally returned

to their classrooms on September 12. Once classes resumed, the media was awash with heartwarming photos and videos of students coming together, chatting excitedly as they walked into their classrooms, and being welcomed back to school by their teachers.

Throughout the pandemic, education experts have not only stressed on the catastrophic learning losses that would result from prolonged school closure, but on the adverse impacts on the mental health of isolated students as well. The joyous reactions of the returnees were testament to the fact that their concerns were not overstated.

As we welcome the younger generation back to the physical learning environment, it is clear that simply returning to school is not enough; the students need all the support they can get to recover from learning losses—especially those who were not able to access online education due to the digital divide.

However, there is another matter of great concern that is starting to become apparent: the empty seats in the classrooms.

This week, *The Daily Star* published the story of Nargis Nahar, from Kurigram Sadar upazila, who graduated from Class 8 of Sardob High School in 2020 with eight other female classmates. When she returned to school last week, she realised she was the only one there—all the other girls had become victims of child marriage and had dropped out. According to the head teacher of her school, one sixth grader, two seventh graders, four eighth graders and three 10th graders had also been married off during the pandemic. Out of 63 previously enrolled female students, only 15 girls returned to school when it reopened.

This state of affairs has been seen in many schools across the country. On September 7, *Prothom Alo* released a shocking report of 50 different cases of child marriage—students from the same school—in Alipur union in Satkhira, all of which took place during the Covid shutdown. A study conducted by Brac estimates that child marriage may have increased by 13 percent during the pandemic—the highest in 25 years.

However, it is not only girls who are at risk. In December last year, *The Daily*

Star ran a photo story of nine-year-old Nayeem, who was selling cigarettes and betel leaves during school closure to support his family (his mother had lost her job as a domestic help). The picture of the round-faced, smiling boy, hard at work on the streets when he should be in school, garnered attention; Nayeem received support from a social organisation and returned to school. But have other children—who have been forced to take up jobs during the shutdown, especially after the pandemic pushed their families further into poverty—had similar luck? In Nargis' school in Kurigram, out of the 162 enrolled male students, only 50 boys have returned.

The fact that fewer students are returning to school is corroborated by government data: according to a *Prothom Alo* report on September 19, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) has been collecting daily data on student attendance, which was, at the time, around 60 percent. While it is still early days and attendance may increase, there is no denying that child marriage and child labour have gone up during the pandemic, and this could easily translate into an increased rate of school dropout in the country if concerted efforts are not made immediately. This trend has been observed all over the world, from Brazil and the US to India and South Africa, with girls being affected the worst. According to Unicef, in South and West Asia, 2.8 million women and girls may not be able to return to education after the pandemic—from pre-primary to tertiary levels.

At present, it is difficult to estimate to what extent the dropout rate might increase. In 2019, the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (Banbeis) reported that the dropout rate of boys at the secondary level had already increased to 36 percent, the highest since 2011, and the dropout rate of girls continued to be persistently higher—it was 40.19 percent at the time. A report by Save the Children from July 2020 warned that Bangladesh was among 28 countries that faced moderate to high risks of school dropout, especially for female students. Their concerns were echoed by the government: in June last year, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) finalised its stakeholder engagement plan on the Covid-19 situation, where it warned of a pandemic-induced rise in dropout rates, which would most likely be linked to increased incidences of early marriage, adolescent fertility, and child labour—especially among children from disadvantaged families. At the time, the DPE proposed strengthening monitoring mechanisms, as well as re-enrolment campaigns involving participatory community actions and awareness programmes, to bring children back to school.

Are these plans still on track? How quickly will they be implemented? According to *The Daily Star*, the education authorities have developed a Covid-19 Response and Recovery Plan with an estimated budget of Tk 768 crore. Details have been given in a yet-to-be released position paper, jointly prepared by the Economic Relations Division and Brac, on how a bulk of these recovery funds will be concentrated on arranging facilities at schools to follow health protocols, and on developing remote learning.

However, around 11 percent of the funds will be directed towards student assessment and teachers' training. This is crucial for preventing dropouts, since research suggests that one of the biggest predictors of school dropouts is falling behind in studies, especially from low-quality schools. But dropouts can be



Nayeem, a third grader, was forced into child labour during the pandemic, but after his photo in *The Daily Star* drew attention, a social organisation helped him return to school. Not many children have been so lucky.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

prevented only if these assessments are followed up by remedial education to help the students who have fallen behind.

The position paper, which was obtained by *The Daily Star*, also recommended the introduction of two to three years' back-to-school campaigns with a focus on dropout-prone areas, but the initial report on the paper does not clarify how much resources will be committed to prevent school dropouts specifically. Targeted and specific incentives for going back to school, like stipends or school feeding, have been recommended as a strategy as well.

A January 2021 research paper from the Asian Development Bank confirms that stipends have a positive impact on reducing dropouts—“a conservative estimate shows that the development benefits of the [female secondary] stipend programme outweigh its cost by more than 200 percent”—and the Tk 19,280 crore government project proposal (announced in August last year) to provide daily school

meals for all of the 1.41 crore government primary school students by 2023 is likely to have an important effect on reducing dropouts as well.

Of course, the question of the day is, when will these plans actually translate into action? And in the time that it takes for this to happen, how many students will be lost to child marriage and child labour? The lag between proposing and implementing government projects has become so notorious that even the country's premier has publicly criticised the delays, urging speedy implementation.

Certain things, for example, could easily be done right now, such as the collection of gender segregated data to track the changes in school enrolment. Although the DSHE has been attempting to do so via a Google Doc link on their website, this is hardly likely to reach the rural

and marginalised areas, where we most urgently need this data from. Instead, it would be more practical to partner with NGOs and local leaders, who can also conduct visits to families with school dropouts and motivate them to send their children back to school.

There is no denying the fact that education recovery in Bangladesh will be a long and difficult journey, and the focus will be on ensuring that students are safe in their classrooms and able to recover from learning losses. But we cannot leave behind the students who have not made it back to their classrooms yet—and perhaps never will, if we delay in reaching out to them. In this case, such a delay will not only be a waste of time and potential; it can be the anvil that comes crashing down on the dreams of many Bangladeshi children.

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @shuprovatasneem

Delivering climate finance is the key to COP26 success



SALEEMUL HUQ

THIS week, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres held a high-level meeting on climate change in New York, where Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was one of the

leaders invited to add momentum to the actions needed to tackle climate change before the upcoming climate conference, COP26, hosted by the United Kingdom and scheduled to be held in Glasgow in November this year.

One of the most urgent issues is the delivery of USD 100 billion every year from the developed countries to support the developing countries to tackle climate change, which was promised to begin from 2020.

I will provide a history of this pledge, its lack of success so far, and what needs to be done now on an urgent basis for the developed countries to retain any semblance of credibility going into COP26 in November.

The annual fund of USD 100 billion to be provided by the rich countries to the poorer countries in climate support was first proposed by former US President Barack Obama, at the climate summit held in Copenhagen, Denmark back in 2009. However, as the Copenhagen meeting ended in failure to achieve an agreement, the idea was reintroduced in 2015, at COP21 in Paris, and was enshrined in the Paris Agreement.

The pledge by the developed countries was that they would provide USD 100 billion a year, from 2020 onwards, and the amount would be increased after five years.

An associated demand from the developing countries was for half of that amount to fund adaptation efforts in the most vulnerable developing countries, and the other half to support mitigation efforts.

The developed countries had a good five years to plan how to deliver this promised amount, but they did not prepare at all.

As a result, 2020 has come and gone with no concrete idea of how much climate finance has been provided, by who, and to whom. There is even no agreement on how much each of the countries (that have taken the pledge) is supposed to contribute to that USD 100 billion fund, and how it should be delivered, or who should track the payments.



Rich countries have to buckle up and make their due contribution to tackle climate change.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The latest figures provided by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which tracks Development Assistance, show that in 2019, the total amount of climate finance, as reported by the developed countries, was USD 79.6 billion only. Another aspect of this was that only 20 percent of the fund went into supporting adaptation efforts, while 80 percent went into mitigation works in the form of loans, rather than

Hence the majority of the climate finance was neither new, nor in addition to development assistance.

Now let's come to 2020, for which we don't have any updated figures available, although the developed countries themselves acknowledge that they did not reach the USD 100 billion target, and they are now scrambling to put together a USD 100 billion package before COP26. They should recall that by November 2021, they

will owe USD 100 billion for 2020 and another USD 100 billion for 2021.

From the perspective of the developing countries, this has become an issue of credibility for the developed countries in any further discussion going forward.

The Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) countries, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, have demanded that the developed countries present a plan for delivering USD 500 billion to cover five years—from 2020 to 2024. They also demanded that half of this amount be directed to support adaptation activities in the most vulnerable developing countries.

This is what the UN secretary-general is trying to get the developed countries to abide by.

An important aspect of this situation is that USD 100 billion per year is no longer an adequate amount to tackle the impacts of climate change, which will require trillions of dollars from now on. This will require all the countries to mainstream the tackling of climate change—both through mitigation and adaptation—into national development investments, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This will mean that every country, both rich and poor, must mainstream their climate change investment into national development investments going forward.

Bangladesh is a pioneer in taking this initiative by allocating nearly eight percent of the national budget, amounting to well over USD 2 billion, to tackle climate change, to 20 ministries as well as through civil society organisations. This is an example that many other countries will need to follow going forward.

Hence the totemic annual funding of USD 100 billion is not going to make a huge difference in practical terms, but is mostly a symbolic test for the developed countries to retain an iota of credibility as they come to Glasgow in November.

Let's see if they can pass the test.

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh.