

Abandoned children deserve better care

Govt must expand and improve services for these children

The government programme for abandoned young children, Chhoto Moni Nibas, operating in six small centres located in six divisions, is doing a relatively commendable job of giving care to those without parents. However, like any facilities run by the state, they are not without problems. In fact, there are complaints about the service that is provided, as well as allegations of corporal punishment and even forced religious conversion, but the main problem facing the children is the lack of a family environment. This could be solved if there were clear laws or easy procedures for adoption in the country through which the children could be taken in by interested couples without any hassle.

However, we do not have such laws that address adoption comprehensively. A law was enacted in 1972 to ensure the adoption of war children, but it was repealed in 1982 due to various complaints. For this, couples interested in adopting have to jump through many hoops to get approval, not to mention the still-unfriendly social attitude to adoption of children without parental identity. Sometimes they have to go to family courts. But many still cannot adopt – which can be understood from an estimate saying that 39 percent of the children in the Chhoto Moni Nibas system have not been adopted. For children who are not lucky enough to find a home, the future can be dismal. If they are not adopted by the time they reach the age of seven, they are transferred to government family homes where they can remain until they turn 18. However, without proper guidance and care, many end up getting involved in drugs and crimes.

Something very similar often happens with the vast number of street children in Bangladesh, many of whom are also abandoned or otherwise estranged from their families. Approximately 1.6 million street children live in the country, with 75 percent of them residing in the capital, according to an estimate. The number of street children in Dhaka alone, according to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, stands at about 450,000. Non-government organisations working for street children say these minors often engage in various illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, theft, and robbery. More concerning is the fact that children, who lack any form of assistance or protection, are denied most of their basic rights and get addicted to drugs at extremely young ages.

This is very unfortunate. There is no denying that children are our future, and if they are not cared for and guided properly, that future is bound to be bleak. If we want a future free of crime and social disturbance, the state must ensure proper care for abandoned children. It should expand its coverage of services and bring as many of them within the purview of its support programme as possible. These children already come from a background of trauma; it is the state's duty to make sure they don't continue to live in that trauma for the rest of their lives.

Will Ichhamati ever flow again?

Random, uncoordinated projects cannot save our rivers

We are utterly disappointed at the failure of a project undertaken to save our once mighty river Ichhamati – by increasing its navigability and freeing up its banks – that flows through Pabna district. Reportedly, the implementation of the Tk 8.15 crore project has been stopped midway due to cases filed by the encroachers and lack of coordination between Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the project implementation company TTSL.

According to our report, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) started dredging 5.67 kilometres of the river to increase its navigability under a project worth Tk 5.46 crore in March 2021. Although the project was supposed to end in June this year, TTSL could only complete 30 percent of the work by that time and left the project site some months ago. As a result, the re-excavated part of the river has been covered with silt again, meaning that Tk 95 lakh of public money was spent in vain.

The other Tk 2.69 crore project to evict the illegal encroachers from the riverbank also faced an abrupt end because the encroachers have filed a series of related cases. Although a total of 610 illegal structures out of 1053 have been removed from the riverbank as of now, the authorities cannot continue the eviction drives due to stay orders by the court. Many grabbers are trying to take advantage of this and reoccupy the land on the riverbank.

From the present situation of this project, it is clear that there has been a serious lack of coordination between WDB and TTSL. Otherwise, how can a company leave a project site without completing the work? Is there no accountability of the firm concerned? And why didn't the WDB hand over the entire project site to the TTSL? The company is now claiming that it was unable to complete the project because the entire project site was not given to them. While the WDB must clear the confusion regarding this and reveal the truth, the TTSL must also answer why they did not listen to the repeated pleas of the WDB to complete the excavation work.

Another question that we must ask is, how can river grabbers file cases against eviction activities? As we know, a few years back, the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) prepared a list of grabbers across the country. What happened to that list? Has any action been taken against the identified grabbers?

The failure of this project has once again proved that saving our rivers from illegal encroachment and indiscriminate pollution is not an easy job. It will need well-coordinated planning and sincere efforts from all stakeholders concerned to implement such interventions. Random projects, taken at a whim, will not produce results. The BWDB, BIWTA, NRCC, and all other relevant agencies must come together and chalk out a plan to save whatever is left of our rivers. Equally importantly, the opinions of the local people must be heard while implementing such projects in future. And the 17-point High Court directive, given in 2009, should be our guidelines in all our endeavours to protect rivers.

'New year, new curriculum' cannot transform our school education



Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University, chair of Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN) and vice chair of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE).

MANZOOR AHMED

Throughout 2022, education authorities focused on returning to a "normal" routine, making minimal adjustments mostly in organising public examinations. But now, we are paying a price for ignoring the depth and breadth of the problems that exist in our education system.

Many educators had argued last year and at the beginning of this year for adopting a recovery and remedial plan of two to three years to make up for the learning loss from the long pandemic-induced school closure. The advice was largely ignored. Policymakers seemed uninterested in an objective reckoning of causes and consequences.

Educators had advised to: a) carry out a rapid assessment in each primary school on students' readiness for their grade level in basic skills of Bangla and maths, and science and English at the secondary level, b) extend the current school year to next June and help students be prepared for their grade in core skills (and take this opportunity to also switch the school year period to September-June permanently, which is justifiable by the climate pattern of Bangladesh), c) help teachers with guidance, online support, and incentives to carry out remedial work for their students, and d) shift the emphasis from public and school exams to improving teaching learning to recover learning loss.

The authorities, in response, suspended the primary completion and junior secondary public exams – a welcome move that was being demanded even before the pandemic.

However, the HSC exam in 2021 was also suspended and the SSC exam was conducted for some optional subjects, leaving out core subjects such as languages and science. These were controversial decisions.

In 2022, SSC and HSC exams were held based on an abridged syllabus. The logic behind this, apparently, was to go back to the pre-Covid school routine as soon as possible. But the need to specify what lessons students would be tested on points to a basic problem of public exams, which require students to memorise answers and depend on private tutors and guidebooks.

The alternative could be to test basic competencies in languages, maths, and science that students are expected to acquire at the secondary school stage without referring to detailed lesson contents in textbooks. The latter should be an element of classroom lessons and tested there and then by teachers on a regular basis.

But education authorities' response was dictated by their need to maintain, above all, the public exam timetable. Not much attention was exerted on designing and implementing a recovery and remedial plan. There was also a tendency to underestimate the many negative effects of the pandemic –



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social, emotional, health-related, and economic – that affected children's ability to participate in education. This is manifested in the increased number of child marriages, increased child labour and higher rate of school dropouts.

The two education ministries and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) have been working on rolling out a revision of the school curriculum, which was last updated in 2012. The syllabus and textbooks based on the new curriculum were expected to be tried out in 2021. Due to the school closure, of course, this was put off. Still, use of the revised textbooks has started on a small scale at the secondary level this year, and a similar piloting is expected for the primary level in 2023.

Many education experts had urged that rolling out the new curriculum should be put off in order to direct the efforts and attention of key agencies towards designing and implementing a learning recovery and remedial plan. These agencies, currently busy with the new curriculum, are the NCTB, the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE), the National Academy of Educational Administration and Management (NAEM), and the education boards and directorates.

Educationalists have argued that the critical need of the hour is to work on learning loss recovery rather than introducing new changes to educational content and pedagogy. They opine that

the main weakness of our schools is the absence of effective teaching and learning in the classrooms, mainly due to teachers' weak professional skills and lack of capabilities and motivation, as well as the subpar working conditions of schools. Rewriting the curricula and textbooks can make little difference in tackling these foundational issues.

In fact, the 2012 curriculum could

existed in the 2012 curriculum, but very few of those found their way into classrooms, according to Prof Rahman.

Particularly problematic, as per experts, is the way school-based assessment of students is to be linked to public exam scores, with 40 to 60 percent of public exam marks to be determined by classroom assessment. Can teachers and schools be relied on to

not be implemented in classrooms because of the weaknesses mentioned above. What assurance is there that the new curriculum would be better implemented? Education experts were of the view that a recovery plan, bringing at least the majority of the students up to their respective grade levels, would help create the conditions for implementing a reformed curriculum in schools and better prepare teachers for their tasks.

What has been seen of the new curriculum so far suggests that the concerns about going ahead with it at this time are not unfounded. Prof Siddiqur Rahman, who was at the lead for preparing and introducing the 2012 curriculum, writes, "It is good to be ambitious, but being ambitious beyond limits that cannot be realised is mere extravagance" (*Bangladesh Protidin*, November 2, 2022).

Rahman writes that a "paradigm shift" is claimed for the new curriculum but, except for rhetoric, what this means in practice is not quite clear.

Experiential learning is the buzzword used when describing the curriculum. This is a common objective and a term used often in describing a school curriculum. But will teachers' skills, the classroom environment, and the student-teacher ratio make it possible to put the right pedagogy into practice?

Training teachers for a few weeks cannot remove the many prevailing obstacles. Ideas about activities, projects, and student engagement

implement this fairly, at present? And are enough of them technically capable of doing so?

School-based formative assessment as part of teaching learning is highly desirable, and this is the direction to go in by preparing teachers, students, and parents for this pedagogic approach. It is also important in its own right and it is not necessary to link it with public exam results.

Other populist ideas, not well-thought-out in our present context, have been proposed in the revised curriculum. One is requiring students to pick a vocational subject in secondary school – a popular solution often offered for a complex problem, but there is no good evidence that it works. The number of separate subjects and the curriculum burden are about the same as before. Though the necessity of these have been questioned and possibilities for re-alignment have been suggested, these are not reflected in the new curriculum.

I want to underscore that forming an ambitious and theoretically ideal curriculum will not transform our school education. Preparing teachers and creating thriving conditions for them in schools will. Forming a good recovery plan for school education and implementing it well is likely to prepare the ground for moving towards achieving the objectives of the new curriculum. Not doing so will land us in a bigger conundrum in 2023 and beyond.

Who benefits from sanctions?



Dr Caf Dowlah, a former professor of Economics with the City University of New York is currently working on Extraterritorial Application of US Economic and Financial Sanctions at Columbia University Law School, New York.

CAF DOWLAH

Dozens of countries and thousands of individuals and entities around the world are currently entangled in a complex web of multilateral sanctions imposed by the United Nations, or unilateral sanctions imposed by powerful Western nations like the United States and the European Union. Demonstratively, most of these sanctions are targeted at states, entities, and individuals in less developed countries. Genuine questions can, therefore, be asked about the legitimacy and legality of these sanctions, as well as who benefits and who suffers because of them.

There is, however, nothing new about sanctions – even ancient Greeks were familiar with them. Pericles's Megarian Decree, issued in 432 BC, in response to the kidnapping of three Aspasian women, is perhaps the oldest example of sanctions in recorded history. Up until World War I, sanctions were indeed a routine part of warfare.

But as the international community matured in its efforts to prevent war, the imperatives for using sanctions shifted. And since WWI, in matters of breach of international law and order, non-lethal sanctions, such as economic and financial sanctions, have evolved into legitimate instruments of international law enforcement.

As both individual states and the UN and other international bodies began imposing sanctions in cases of breach of international law, instead of declaring war against wrongful actions, economic sanctions have received greater legitimacy around the world, especially since WWII.

The US, the most prolific enforcer of unilateral sanctions in the world, currently has sanctions in place against more than 20 countries. Most of these countries are among the poorest in the world, and having been cut-off from the global economic and financial systems, many of them are unable to

provide essential food and medicines to their populations.

Most US sanctions are equipped with extraterritorial legal effect and enforcement capabilities. Among others, they require banks and corporations around the world to avoid business transactions with individuals, entities and states under its lists. As a result, every domestic and international bank that seeks to do business with US banks must now screen US sanction targets as part of their normal compliance programme. Violators of such regulatory outreach often pay steep penalties.

Much of US sanctions are underpinned by the almighty US dollar. Despite major structural shifts in the international monetary system over the past six decades – such as the emergence of digital currencies and new payment ecosystems, and the emergence of new reserve currencies such as the Euro and Chinese renminbi – in all practical purposes, the US dollar still reigns supreme in global economic and financial transactions. Moreover, attempts of several countries such as China, Iran and Russia to avoid transactions in US dollars have failed to make much of a dent in its status as the world's reserve currency.

Considerable debate exists over the use of economic sanctions. There are cases where they have been effective.

For example, US sanctions helped to topple Haiti's Duvalier in 1986, Uganda's Idi Amin in 1979, Chile's Allende in 1973, and the Dominican Republic's Trujillo in 1961. The threat of US sanctions also helped to discourage South Korea from acquiring a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in 1976, in freeing US hostages from Iran in 1981, and forcing the country to come to the negotiating table in 2012. But, overall, most sanctions have hardly succeeded in achieving their professed goal – and more often than not, they end up causing massive harm to the people of the targeted states.

Former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, once described sanctions as "blunt instruments and legitimate means to exert pressure on political leaders whose behaviour is unlikely to be affected by the plight of their subject." Boutros Ghali is partially right – sanctions are indeed blunt instruments, but they are not always legitimate. There have indeed been many instances whereby the imposition of sanctions had either been unregulated or based on questionable legality or legitimacy. Think about the completely unjustified comprehensive sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s by the US, which cost at least one million lives, including the death of over half a million infants.