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Reopen and reimagine: The post-covid-19 economy

Akhtar Mahmood

Geopolitical consequences of covid-19: Rethinking diplomacy in Bangladesh

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Reopen and reimagine: The post-covid-19 economy

Dealing with the covid-19 induced new world will require new ways of carrying out and governing economic activity. As Bangladesh reopens it must also reimagine. So, what does "reimagining" the economy involve? This article focuses on three aspects of this agenda. Engendering a productivity culture in the private sector and a performance culture in government will require a paradigm shift. Read more about the three aspects of this agenda.

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Email
ask@whiteboardmagazine.com

Advertise
advert@whiteboardmagazine.com
+88 02-9111260



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@whiteboardedit

Address
2, Road 32 (old) 11 (new)
Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi
Dhaka 1209, Bangladesh

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subs@whiteboardmagazine.com

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From the Editor

Proceed with caution, and hope

Protecting lives and livelihoods was the challenge facing the world as soon as it became clear that covid-19 was here to stay. Governments around the world struggled to find the difficult balance between the two. Shutting down sectors that support millions of people, to keep them safe from the virus, could only be a short-term measure. It is premature to say that any country has successfully dealt with the virus, as we still don't know how this pandemic will play out.

As we prepare to face further waves of the virus, there are lessons which can already be learnt and applied. In this issue we look at the challenges – and opportunities – that lie ahead.

Bangladesh's economy was prevented from plummeting with the creation of a sizeable stimulus package, and a controlled reopening of key sectors. But do we have the necessary data to shape the recovery strategy? In this issue, Akhtar Mahmood takes a look at how effective monitoring can help unlock the potential of the country's pandemic-era policy actions and get the best out of the private sector in the process. In terms of personal data, we are faced with a different challenge. Anita Ghazi Rahman and Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury examine how data protection and data security are more crucial than ever, as the "new normal" has led to unprecedented amounts of personal information being generated by users.

It is clear that Bangladeshis have opted to live with the virus and the lockdown fatigue is real. Yet there is no room for complacency. Until a vaccine becomes widely available globally, life will continue to be a series of calculated risks. However, in the case of wearing masks, complacency is exactly what seems to be setting in after a good start. Jason Abaluck and Mushfiq Mobarak looks at how this can be put back on track and why it is so important.



As the world economy lurches towards a generation defining recession, resuscitating economic growth has become a global priority. Imran Ahmed and Syed Mafiz Kamal takes an in-depth look at how a job-centric recovery is a viable option with particular gains to be made in agriculture. The countryside is also the central theme of K.A.S. Murshid's article, which highlights the convergence of factors that can turn the rural non-farming sector into a key driver of the post-covid-19 economy.

While countries continue to lockdown, shut and re-open borders, the pandemic has also changed the nature of cross-border cooperation. Shahidul Haque and Nashita Behroz Jalil look at the geopolitical consequences, and opportunities, facing Bangladesh in the post-covid-19 world order.

Recovery cannot be about growth and economics only. In her interview Eeshita Azad talks about how a closer working relationship between the creative community and the government is more vital than ever.

We approach the end of 2020 with mixed feelings; the world is a very different place to what it was one year ago. An age-defying virus remains a threat. Yet, there is also hope. There are initial signs of successful vaccines being developed, and we can start to envision a post-covid-19 world. The contributors of this issue and the WhiteBoard team have sought to untangle some of these challenges and opportunities – we hope you will enjoy their contributions and continue this important conversation with us.

Radwan Mujib Siddiq, Editor-In-Chief



Reopen and reimagine

The post-covid-19 economy

by Syed Akhtar Mahmood

As Bangladesh recovers from the ravages of covid-19 and the economy reopens, both government and business must face an important fact: the world is not going to be the same again and the normalcy that everyone desires will be a New Normal. Dealing with this new world will require new ways of carrying out and governing economic activity. As Bangladesh reopens it must also reimagine.

So, what does “reimagining” the economy involve? This article focuses on three aspects of this agenda. First, the private sector needs to be more competition-oriented. It needs to invest in productivity improvements and not in personal connections. Second, the government needs to be more performance-oriented, focusing less on expenditure targets and more on the results of its spending. Third, there is a critical need for people to work together. There needs to be coordination within government and collaboration between government and the non-governmental sector.

A productivity-oriented private sector

Most discussions of Bangladesh's competitive advantage focus on low labour costs. It is time to move away from such a mind-set and think about productive labour, not cheap labour. The capacity of Bangladeshi workers to learn fast is now well recognised. This ability should be better leveraged to make it possible to achieve significant increases in productivity through learning and technology diffusion.

The time has come to establish a productivity culture in the private sector. Consider the garment industry, 75% of whose export revenues now come from just five products. The industry urgently needs to diversify and improve productivity. This requires better wages for workers. A demand for higher wages typically triggers concerns among factory owners about the potential impact on profitability and competitiveness. But such a trade-off is not inevitable. An increase in wages will bring some relief to the lives of thousands of poor families. It will also trigger a more serious search for efficiency improvements in the industry. It is possible to have the best of both worlds.

Changes are needed in the leather industry too, where better environmental performance will be key to achieving the desired increases in exports. And quality assurance is critical to the growth of the pharmaceutical industry. In brief, the focus needs to move from just growth in output to increases in productivity, ensuring quality and protection of the environment. The respectable gross domestic product growth rates of many years have masked the fact that productivity and quality consciousness remain low in much of Bangladesh's private sector.

How can this change be brought about? There is no shortage of recommendations on what needs to be done. The challenge is to make the relevant actors do what they need to do. Long-entrenched behaviour is difficult to change but is not immutable. In some contexts, this might be a question of a big push. In Bangladesh, it may have to involve a series of nudges – of well-executed dribbles rather than a free kick.

A starting point is to look for existing good practices in the business sector. Consider the textile factories that serve the garment industry. The growth of the textile industry is a good example of backward linkages in Bangladesh. However, it has come at a cost. The hugely inefficient use of water in the industry, with many factories taking in three to four times more water than is needed, has led to an alarming drop in water levels around the textile clusters. A few years ago, one could find water by digging 100 feet; now one must go deeper, to 400 feet or more in many places. But there is hope. One large textile factory, whose water consumption per kilogram of fabric was 120 litres – lower than the industry median of more than 150 litres but higher than what it need be – has now reduced this to only 60 litres. This has been done through modest investment in upgrading equipment and simple good practices such as insulating standpipes, repairing leaks and water recycling. The factory also has a state-of-the-art effluent treatment plant and facilities for the rain harvesting of water. The cost savings repaid the investment within two years.

Similar stories can be heard in other industries – stories of those at the vanguard who are introducing new products, achieving productivity improvements and experimenting with new processes and business models. Such stories demonstrate that productivity gains are possible. The challenge now is to replicate their experiments and experiences in the rest of the business sector. Industries have often developed when laggards have learned from the

front-runners.

Assume that only 10% of the factories in an industry are pursuing good practices. If two laggards can learn from one front-runner, and it takes two years for the

learning process to yield fruits, then the 10% may become 30% in two years and 60% in five years. That is not a bad outcome at all!

As management experts tell us, benchmarking is critical to change. There is a need to know how our companies are performing relative to best practice, both globally as well as in Bangladesh. This brings us to the critical need for data. This is an area where much more needs to be done. Consider the garment industry. It is unfortunate that, for an industry of such size and importance to the economy, there is no easily available database providing granular, regularly updated data, which allows government and others to thoroughly assess the structure and performance of the industry, including trends over time. Some macro data, such as on total production, exports and employment, is available, but what is really needed is firm-level data. If the industry associations are not collecting such data, this is a poor reflection on the benchmarking practices in the second largest garment exporter of the world. Similar issues of data availability exist in other parts of the private sector.

So, this is the place to start. Get better data and disseminate good practices. But, more importantly, incentivise the private sector to change. This brings us to the role of government.

A more performance-oriented government

The private sector will need a conducive policy, regulatory and institutional environment to address the challenges mentioned above. The government has a large role to play in this. Just as the private sector needs to be productivity-oriented, the government needs to be performance-oriented.

What does this mean? Let us consider the case of government support to the private sector. East Asian countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, for many years provided a wide range of support to businesses, especially export-oriented ones, to help them grow. But the support came with tough conditions, such as meeting export and productivity growth targets. Failure to do so would mean drastic withdrawal of the benefits. The Korean government, for example, was ruthless in instilling such discipline and was ready to let even chaebols, the large conglomerates, die if they did not meet the targets. Our readymade garments industry repeatedly asks for help on one pretext or the other. The government usually obliges but does not always demand performance in return. Even when it does, this is more about maintaining business as usual, not bringing about the much-needed transformation in the industry.

In a post-covid-19 world, the relations between government and the private sector will have to change. Industry cannot go on asking for bailouts from government. Government support should be linked to strict performance conditions, such as diversification and productivity improvement targets, and should not favour some sectors over others. Asymmetric government support is rampant in Bangladesh. First, there is a bias against exports. Second, within the export sector, there is a bias against non-garment products. Third, within garments, there is favouritism towards a small set of products. No wonder Bangladesh's export basket is undiversified.

In a post-covid-19 world, the relations between government and the private sector will have to change. Industry cannot go on asking for bailouts from government.

The performance orientation needs to cover all aspects of the government's work. While there are islands of good performance in government, it still lacks a strong performance culture that permeates all levels. As a result, implementation failures are common.

Let us consider the various covid-19-related

initiatives of government, such as the economic stimulus programme to address the adverse short-run impact, and the FY2020/21 budget, which represents an effort to start to address the medium-term challenges. How do we ensure we get value for money from these programmes? There is a very substantial (23%) increase in this year's budget allocation to the health sector. Historically, agencies in this sector have struggled to spend allocated funds, let alone achieve good results from the spending. Given the multiple examples of ill-practice in this sector – note recent reports of artificially inflated procurement prices for health sector purchases – this huge increase in allocations and the resulting spending pressure on government agencies may lead to widespread inefficiency and wastage.

Addressing this challenge requires a sound monitoring framework underpinned by a logical framework that links inputs (such as government expenditures on health) to outputs (such as more hospitals and hospital beds, better doctors and nurses, a greater supply of equipment and medicines) and finally to outcomes (such as widely available, high-quality health services). In real-life projects, inputs may not lead to the expected outputs if project implementation is deficient. Money may be spent inefficiently, for example siphoned off by undeserving contractors and their aiders from respective public agencies.

However, outputs do not necessarily lead to outcomes. For example, extra hospital beds may be put in place but poor people may not benefit if they cannot afford to pay for a hospital stay. Such risks should be considered and addressed in addition to building more hospitals. Failure to do so would mean poor project design. If the design is deficient, even a well-implemented project will not produce the desired results.

The same is true of the economic stimulus package. Liquidity support to banks, an important plank of the stimulus programme, may not achieve the desired goal of reviving production and employment in the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector, for a variety of reasons: banks may struggle to complete the formalities of lending, especially to new customers with whom they have no prior relationship; the demand for loans may be poor if SMEs are discouraged by onerous loan processing conditionalities; or enterprises may face a shortage of demand or disruptions in raw material supplies.

A good monitoring system based on measurable indicators will help verify whether the expected results of a government programme are being achieved and, if not, may trigger corrective actions by providing

Liquidity support to banks, an important plank of the stimulus programme, may not achieve the desired goal of reviving production and employment in the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector, for a variety of reasons

clues about the underlying reasons for implementation failures. Central agencies such as the Planning Commission, the Ministry of Finance and Bangladesh Bank may establish overarching monitoring mechanisms to assess the macro trends, while individual ministries may have mechanisms to keep track of implementation at the project level. Annual Performance Agreements with ministries and government agencies, introduced a few years ago, are a step in the right direction, but many of these still focus more on delivery of outputs and need to be made more outcome-oriented. The prime minister's recent directive to establish branches outside Dhaka of the Planning Ministry's Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division is laudable and should be followed through. The indicators to be used, and their target values, should be set at the beginning of a project. Establishing a monitoring framework is not something to be left for the future.

A different relationship between government and the private sector

Engendering a productivity culture in the private sector and a performance culture in government will require a paradigm shift in the relation between government and the private sector. At the core of this will be a focus on accountability for results.

The prime minister's recent directive to establish branches outside Dhaka of the Planning Ministry's Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division is laudable and should be followed through.

There will be a need for collaboration. The monitoring systems mentioned above will require real-time information from the beneficiaries of government programmes, including the private sector. While the government needs to take the initiative to establish such feedback mechanisms, private sector associations can help design these

mechanisms and ensure that their members provide the feedback when asked. Businesses should also be forthcoming in suggesting what corrective actions are required to improve implementation. Data will also be critical in designing government policies and programmes to facilitate the shift to a productivity culture in the private sector.

The paradigm shift will require a significant change in the mind-set of the business sector, from seeking protection and privilege to becoming truly competitive. The government should also see its role differently, moving from privilege distribution to performance-demanding. Policies and programmes need to be competition-enhancing. That is the demand of a post-covid-19 world. □

Syed Akhtar Mahmood was Lead Private Sector Specialist in the World Bank Group. He is an economist.

Data, digitalisation and public welfare post-covid-19

by Anita Ghazi Rahman and Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury

As oil was once the new gold, data is now the new oil. The 2009 political promise to establish a “Digital Bangladesh” heralded the beginning of the data-driven digital and knowledge economy. In Bangladesh’s push for such a digital knowledge economy, even pre-covid-19 processes were being digitized – and entire platforms and products emerged. These have increased efficiency and reduced operating costs for the public and private sectors, at the same time giving citizens easier access to products and services. Local mobile payment services, such as bKash and Nagad, have been positively disrupting the traditional banking system, in turn expanding the net of financial inclusion and digital commerce.

Local e-commerce platforms such as Chaldal and ShopUp are now almost household brands. E-logistics companies such as Pathao and Shohoz, as well as internet-led on-demand entertainment platforms such as Bongo, have created a data-driven digital economy, which in the pre-Digital Bangladesh era was inconceivable. These information and communication technology (ICT)-driven players have seen remarkable growth, with their presence permeating among the urban population and slowly making headway in rural areas.

In the public sector, a radical move towards e-government, through transforming manual operations into digital services, is creating unprecedented opportunities. These services include online tax return filing, land tax payment, passport application, public procurement, welfare payment, utility payment and many more. Meanwhile, to ensure access for those at the grassroots, Union Information Service Centres have been established for those who have historically not been connected to digitised services.

The pace of all of this has accelerated since the covid-19 crisis began, with Bangladeshis throughout the country now more eager than ever to be part of the digital world.

Opportunity in crisis

It is said that every crisis brings opportunity – and the biggest opportunity that covid-19 has offered has been in the up-scaling of digitalisation. In Bangladesh, the restrictions put in place as a result of covid-19 have led many companies and not-for-profit organisations, in a bid to survive, to prove their agility by digitising segments of their business. Health care and essential services have been at the forefront of pandemic-induced innovation, from mobile testing solutions to tele-medicine consultations; even grocery super-shops have shifted to online delivery. For a largely informal economy like Bangladesh, this represents a resilient way forward.

Educational institutes are now rethinking their teaching and learning environment, making every effort to use online learning facilities, even in this context of new financial, technological and pedagogical limitations. Domains such as retail, finance and communication, which have already “digitalised,” are more effective than ever before, given the growing use of data analytics and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

As such, more “data” is being generated and is available in the market. And such huge data generation requires due regulatory attention. A regulatory framework, which does not duly facilitate data processing, stands in the path to establish a data-led economy.

The benefits of data-driven public health and social welfare management are already showing themselves. During the pandemic, Bangladesh’s government has actively taken movement control decisions, by collaborating with telecommunication companies to obtain location data not just on patients but also on those migrating from urban to rural areas, in order to be able to deliver welfare payments. China, South Korea and Taiwan, in an effort to enforce quarantine, have similarly used phone location data to trace the contacts of covid-19 patients. Globally, such data and information are being shared across jurisdictions in



order to fight covid-19. According to Reuters, mobile carriers in Europe have been sharing anonymous and aggregated data with health authorities in Austria, Germany and Italy, in compliance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

What's with so much data?

Salus populi est suprema lex: regard for public welfare is the highest law. The uptake of digital solutions also raises certain critical issues, related to privacy, security (including national security) and public safety. An individual's personal and locational information can reveal sensitive details, such as place of employment, religious affiliation or political preference. Bangladesh's legal apparatus – namely, the Digital Security Act (DSA), the ICT Act and the Telecom Act – addresses some of these data protection issues. However, there are clearly implementation challenges here.

Citizens of any country, whether or not they are aware of it, generate huge amounts of data, which data-driven enterprises use for either commercial or non-commercial purposes. When accessing sensitive personal data, regulators ensure careful collection, retention and processing, to minimise risks and maximise utility. There is also a wider security concern related to large data misuse. From the point of view of governments, the aim is to find a balance between economic opportunity and the risks posed to security and privacy. There is always the potential that data will be misused to instigate or fuel riots or large-scale anarchy. On the other hand, careful processing of data leads to efficient public service delivery and helps target marginalised groups and mitigate socio-economic issues, as well as driving AI, e-commerce and the social media sector. This has extensive implications across societies and economies.

The prevailing standard on managing the privacy risk posed by data generation is the principle of

The speed of digitalisation in Bangladesh has brought the country to a point where it faces almost the same regulatory challenge as highly digitised societies.

proportionality. Often at the data collection point, regulators set standards for the legal basis on data processing. These include 1) the consent of the data subject; 2) the contractual necessity – i.e. the need to process a contract to which the data subject is a party; 3) the vital interest of the data subject; 4) compliance with legal obligations; 5) the public interest; and 6) the legitimate interest of the regulator or the third-party stakeholders.

Privacy protection framework in Bangladesh

The speed of digitalisation in Bangladesh has brought the country to a point where it faces almost the same regulatory challenge as highly digitised societies. In the US experience on data use, especially in the covid-19 era, location data-sharing proposals have raised legal issues because of the varying nature of laws across states, as well as the privacy protection guaranteed by the federal Constitution. In Bangladesh, Article 43 of the Constitution protects the right to privacy of correspondence and communication. In other words, no law can impinge on privacy unless the government has a legitimate concern. However, such a generic protective provision is not sufficient to address the challenges of the digital era. Hence, a need for time-appropriate legislative framework arises.

Need for domestic data management

Protection of the personal data of users/subscribers is usually governed by a contract between the relevant parties under the existing legal framework. At present, there is no data localisation requirement under Bangladeshi law. As a matter of general practice, it is permitted to store data on a cloud or on servers located outside Bangladesh; this is now common industry practice. But for sensitive data, such a blanket approach is neither safe nor conducive to promoting a local data-oriented industry. A general requirement related to processing certain categories of data within Bangladesh is needed. Such a framework must protect and enable the data-driven digital economy, on which post-covid-19 Bangladesh is desperately reliant.

Bangladesh's prime legislation on digital security, the DSA, addresses some regulatory issues, such as prohibiting harmful and malicious conduct involving computers, internet systems and digital devices, etc. Offences include illegally accessing a digital device; causing damage to a computer system; committing digital or electronic forgery; committing digital or electronic fraud; and conducting e-transactions without legal authority. The government has established an agency to monitor all issues related to ensuring digital security, including protection of identity. The fact that this agency has only just been established means that its approach to law enforcement and consultation with business is yet to be understood. At present, the agency is mandated to monitor and regulate in the areas of cybercrime, cyber-security and licence regulation.

The data protection framework as it stands

Data protection currently varies from sector to sector, with obligations to ensure the protection of personal data imposed through industry-specific directives on an ad hoc basis. Citizens' primary identity information is given statutory protection but

there is a confusing stipulation whereby anyone with “lawful authority” can process the data – but there is no definition of what this is or how it can be obtained. The regulator, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), which leads on the major ICT-related issues, is not empowered to address the challenges of extra-territoriality. If empowered, the regulator could monitor international tech giants, and local data processing could be facilitated effectively. Meanwhile, the DSA focuses on digital security, with a prohibitive framework to address security breaches, but does not envisage the operation of international tech giants and their mode of data extraction and processing.

The DSA-mandated digital security provision thus does not address the management, processing and protection of data. Its operational position is such that the concern for digital infrastructure security has overridden the concern for citizen welfare. The data industry is growing in a situation of unprecedented access to local data by the international tech giants. Many nations have restricted such access, to ensure the growth of their own local data-driven industry and address security concerns. In Bangladesh, a draft data privacy and protection rule focuses unreasonably on local violators, whereas it should be looking more at regulating international tech giants and bringing them to work with the local industry.

A new approach for policy-makers

With the innovation in digitalisation comes a call for policy-makers to act as the guardians of society. What covid-19 has shown is what was known all along – that innovation will always be ahead of policy. This is why regulators play a major role in encouraging digital innovation: they can address the unidentified negative consequences through policies that reflect societal preferences – especially in a situation of crisis. “Agility” is not for businesses alone; policy frameworks also have to be “agile” to accommodate the pace of technological advancement. In the Bangladeshi context, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive statutory framework on the usage, processing and protection of generated data within the country, and also legal empowerment of the regulator not only from a security point of view but also for industry facilitators.

Borderless data and regulatory empowerment

The internet is borderless: it is not enough to regulate and facilitate it at the national level. Meanwhile, any change in law in a foreign jurisdiction will have follow-on effects in Bangladesh too. For example, in 2019 the knock-on effects of the European Union’s data protection and privacy law, the GDPR were felt in business operations in Bangladesh. Countries across the globe have quickly learnt that

regulating digital technologies involves increased dialogue and coherence among government bodies and empowering the regulator with clear legislative provisions to address the borderless nature of the internet. Bangladesh’s regulator BTRC often faces difficulties invoking the DSA and addressing challenges posed by the international tech giants. To respond to this situation, operating laws, the DSA, the Telecom Act and the ICT Act need to be harmonised to empower the regulator.

The future

In the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), data will be the new oil. The future consists of tech-driven innovation, expanding into the 4IR with data as its fuel. From a national law point of view, an agile and flexible regulatory framework, which protects and facilitates the local economy and maximises citizen welfare, is a must. In this “new normal” world that started with the pandemic, it is now clear that the opportunity for the data processing industry in Bangladesh is immense.

But a question remains as to who will lead in this new territory. Will it be the tech giants, extracting big data from national users, or will the nation establish its own data processing industry by proactively directing international players to localise data and work with local industry? If Bangladesh takes the latter path, this will bring benefits to the national economy while addressing issues related to privacy, national security and sovereignty. An effective regulatory framework, focused not only on security threats or cybercrime but also on data extraction and processing for the benefit of local industry, should be prioritised as the way forward for Bangladesh. This requires revising the existing framework in consultation with sector stakeholders and framing a flexible regulatory framework that proactively connects the global with the local. □

Anita Ghazi Rahman is the founder and a partner of The Legal Circle, Bangladesh. She is a lawyer.

Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury is Deputy Minister of Education of the Government of Bangladesh. He is a lawyer and a politician.



A new compact for the creative community?



The covid-19 pandemic had a sudden and substantial impact on the arts and cultural sector. The global health crisis and the uncertainty resulting from it have profoundly affected the operations of organisations as well as individuals – across the sector. Artists and the creative sector workers have been attempting to provide access to culture and arts for their communities. At the same time, they are reacting to the unexpected change in their business model.

Too often, individuals in the creative sector in Bangladesh have lost contracts or employment, with not much financial assistance available. Meanwhile, the government's financial stimulus and donor funding have provided differing levels

of support. However how much of it has reached small to medium creative enterprises, is hard to tell. At the same time, it is unknown whether – or when – the demand for crowded cultural events will return. Artists in both urban and rural Bangladesh are doing everything in their capacity to cope with the coronavirus – and to connect with their audience to bring forth a deeper sense of community.

Eeshita Azad is a creative industry expert and an arts producer with insights into the cultural sector of Bangladesh, the UK and the US. The WhiteBoard team spoke with her to get her take on the impact of covid-19 on artists and the response of Bangladeshi policy-makers. The conversation, edited for length and clarity, is presented below.

How is the creative community reacting to the pandemic?

When the pandemic started, our first reaction – globally, nationally and at individual level – was of shock. There was a resistance to believe that this is really happening. All industries, business to educational institutes alike, went into shock. I might be biased but it felt like the creative community came out of this shock the fastest.

They took care of themselves by singing, writing, producing art and creating stories around the pandemic. They helped others around them, viewers and audiences, to get to a better mental health space. They accepted that the pandemic was happening, there was no way we could stop it. When you are in a war, you need somebody to lead the soldiers forward and I felt like the creative community was doing that all around the world.

I can cite examples in music. The first place was



Wuhan in China. The lockdown happened. People were suddenly indoor for months because the virus was out of control. The whole world was watching them. So, in Wuhan, they started singing. In the evening, they all would stand on their balconies or by their windows and sing together. That not only gave them hope, it made the world, watching them through social media, hopeful as well. We then saw the same happening in Italy, Spain, and New York. It was amazing. We saw individual cases of opera singers or band musicians just getting on the balcony and singing or playing. That was the first thing, music gave us hope.

What has been the community's reaction in Bangladesh?

On a national level in Bangladesh, what I have observed in the theatre and acting community is that they have started using phone-cameras, and then editing the results very cleverly to look like drama episodes. Then we have seen musicians getting together online to jam so that their fans can listen and partake.

I lead a creative non-profit called British Bangladeshi Poetry Collective. Our aim is to use poetry to showcase Bangladeshi heritage to mainstream UK audience. During the lockdown we also sprang into action. We started hosting online poetry writing workshops which led to people sharing their hopes and fears using the safe vehicle of poetry.

How can the industry be helped? What suggestions do you have for policy-makers or even the business community?

In the UK, the first thing was that the government recognised the issue. The Arts Council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund – national bodies that give grants – worked overtime to make sure that cultural organisations could continue to survive. They started with big organisations and then moved to individuals. At first, it was theatres, galleries, libraries and cinemas. Then it was more about the freelancers and small to medium organisations that work in silos.

I was very hopeful when I heard that the Bangladeshi government had allocated USD 130 million for the creative industry. The government realised what was at stake and took the first important step. But what I cannot stress enough is that, while the allocation of this funding is very important, the real achievement will lie in how it is managed and disbursed.

So many different sectors fall into the realm of the creative industry, from fashion to readymade garments to leather to performing arts to craft-makers. This is a huge industry. In my experience, bigger entities are better at acquiring funds such as those being provided under the stimulus. We need to pay attention to the small and medium creative entities. How are they getting the stimulus funding, and what are the modalities they are using?

I have worked for the BBC Media Action, British Council and the Asia Foundation in Bangladesh. I have experience in the charity sector. They have a large database of individual artists, craftspeople and musicians. We also have, for example, the Fashion Design Council, the Crafts Council and other similar non-profit organisations; these entities can share their databases with policy-makers. They can help distribute funds through their network that can provide access to creative communities all over Bangladesh.

I think you nailed it when you said that we also have to think about the non-Dhaka semi-urban and rural artists. Creative communities that are more on the folk side. Can you elaborate?

Yes. Although our resources are Dhaka-centric, Bangladesh does not stop – in fact neither does it start – in Dhaka. Our country is a big one, especially when you think about heritage art. Heritage art does not just mean crafts, like jute work, and jamdani. It also means bauls (folk musicians), folk artists, jatra (travelling theatre); these are part of our culture and proud past. Our national heritage depends on how these art forms stay alive, especially during crisis.

The way the UK has approached the problem seems to have borne fruit. Bangladesh's declaration of funds for the arts community is clearly a good start. Would you recommend a similar modality to that of the UK? Or must the approach be contextualised to Bangladesh?

One thing I must make clear is that there is no reason to follow the West. This pandemic has shown us that nobody has the answer. People are making mistakes. There is no learning from the West for the East. What I am trying to say is that Bangladesh has already taken a huge step forward. Now, it is a matter of distributing funding and making sure it reaches the right people.

What can the creative community learn from this crisis, at both individual and institutional level?

I have actually been thinking about this. I am going to say, as human, we have shown historically that we do not learn from history. We make the same mistakes every time. It is almost a cliché. What happens if, in a decade, there is another huge pandemic? Here, the creative community can help in a big way. With government, philanthropic or corporate support, they can document the lessons learnt from this pandemic. I do not mean only dry, data-based reports but story telling documentaries and films.

For some people it has been music; for some it has been films; for some it has been the TV. Chat shows have now been successfully transferred to Zoom. Bangladeshi big cable channels like NTV, Channel I and Ekattor TV, all of them now have shows that are using streaming. All of this comes under the creative community. This has played a

Imagine the pandemic without any music or films.

huge role in preserving mental health. Imagine the pandemic without any music or films. One piece of learning from this crisis is that art is important. It is necessary for living a meaningful life just as the other basic needs. It should not be of secondary importance for the policy-makers and the think-tanks.

Freelance artists are among the most vulnerable, for the reasons you have outlined. What can an individual plan now? Government support will come, policy actions will come, some corporate support will come

– but the pandemic has also taught us that we have to be resilient.

Individual artists, even as they hold us together as a community, are also vulnerable. They are artistic beings, emotional beings. I have published a number of tips for individual creative artists and pointed to some tips for their post-pandemic careers.

The first thing to remember is, it is not bad being small. Small means agile. Big organisations can seem very sturdy and resilient but they can fall hard, whereas individuals have the flexibility to reinvent. If something is about to fall on their head, they can move out of the way very quickly. Freelancers need to change their mind-set. Do not think of yourself as vulnerable but as someone in a position of strength. Remember everyone is in the same boat, nobody has the answer.

Second, everyone has self-doubt. I think artists have the most self-doubt – that is part of the creative process. I would say try not to be insecure because, no matter what you do, you are unique. No one person is the same as another person.

Tip three is that sometimes being unique is not enough – you do need to stand out. The lockdown has forced us to rethink what we are. We can reinvent our style, get a new skill. The pandemic is a perfect opportunity for experimentation and reinvention. Artists should research, watch other artists, not just nationally but globally.

Tip four, have you tried putting up your work on Instagram? If you are a poet, have you tried Twitter? Have you tried hash-tagging your poems? Before, maybe you were a writer for a print publication. Now you have the whole world online for you. Try thinking a little about different positioning.

Last but not least is to find a cause, find out what inspires you. This does not have to be superficial. Think about others. Maybe you feel very strongly about violence against women or child labour. Let your cause guide you to become a creative professional. Maybe you can donate your work, or just use your brand to raise awareness. Align your work, your art, to the cause. This way you will stand out. You will also inspire people to follow your work.

You are based in London. But you come to Bangladesh for work. What brought you to Bangladesh the last time you were here?

I was in Bangladesh for work in March 2020. I left just when the pandemic started. I am a creative producer and an arts consultant. When planning for Mujib Year [the centenary of the birth of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman] started, the Bangladeshi



government reached up to this international dance group called Akram Khan Company. The group was commissioned to put together a dance piece for the finale to the Mujib Year celebration on 17 March 2020. I was hired as the Bangladesh advisor because of my previous connections with the company and a strong connection with Bangladesh.

To be asked to be a part of the celebration of the birth centenary of the father of the nation was an honour. The whole thing was an example of how resilient the Bangladeshi creative community is. The process was rigorous. 25 local dancers with background in Kathak, Bharatnatyam or Monipuri, were selected. They were trained for a month by Akram Khan Company dancers. These young Bangladeshi dancers, along with three Akram Khan Company dancers, made a flawless eight-minute masterpiece for the Mujib Year finale.

The dance depicted the story of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's, the leader's, call to arms for freedom in 1971. The amazing storytelling made everyone experience that national pride – not just the dancers themselves but all those who were working on the project. Everyone felt that sense of pride of being Bangladeshi.

The "Mujib" performance was supposed to be held in front of an audience of 95,000. Many foreign dignitaries were supposed to attend – not just this performance but the whole centenary celebration. Within two days everything had

to be changed because of the covid-19 situation. And the relevant government agencies were incredibly determined in repurposing this humongous show within two days for streaming on all national television and digital platforms. This was a concerted effort by the company, by the government, by the performers, by the international artists, who all worked together seamlessly to put this on within two days. All in all, the experience will always remain with me as a moment of national pride. □

Eeshita Azad is a fellow at Arts Fundraising & Philanthropy, UK. She is a creative industry expert and an arts producer.



Getting all Bangladeshis to wear masks

by Jason Abaluck and Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak

The case for universal mask use to slow the spread of covid-19 is disarmingly simple: people with respiratory illnesses must wear masks to avoid infecting others and people without the disease can wear a mask as a barrier to infection. Yet in many parts of the globe policy-makers are struggling to identify and implement effective mask policies. In large part, this is because of the novelty of the virus: nothing yet is

conclusive and everything could change with the next study. But in the meantime, every person must wake up in the morning and decide what steps to take to prevent the spread of covid-19. Policy-makers must create guidelines to encourage sound behaviours and choices.

According to information released by Emerging Infectious Diseases in May, an estimated 50–80% of transmission is

MASK USE IN BANGLADESH



Observational data of **150,000+ people** in **1,400 locations** in **May 2020** showed that **only 48%** of people wore masks overall

By **August 2020** a sample survey showed that mask wearing had **declined to less than 21%**

Several strategies to encourage mask wearing have been piloted

- Household mask distribution
- Disseminating brochures
- Community leader engagement
- Loudspeaker messages in markets
- Mask distribution and messaging before Jumma prayers at mosques



These villages saw a 32% decrease in the proportion of people not wearing masks

There has also been an **increase in the percentage of people wearing masks properly** at different locations in villages receiving these interventions

Main Road		+27%
Mosque		+30%
Market		+30%

through individuals who are asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic. Looking at emerging data trends, there is now clear enough evidence supporting the effectiveness of masks at preventing transmission such that universal mask requirements are likely warranted, to contain the virus, save lives and reopen economies sooner. However, while the lab-tested case for mask adoption is overwhelming, there remains considerable uncertainty about the exact effectiveness of mask use in the “real world.” Does wearing a mask while going about regular activities actually stop the virus? And, with so many masks, what kinds work best and are realistic to wear all day?

The focus must now shift beyond whether we need universal mask adoption to how policy-makers can achieve it – and what the actual expected benefits are. While the vast majority of people in the world live in countries that either mandate public mask use or strongly recommend it, actual mask use remains low in many countries. In a recent YouGov survey of 26 countries, Italy was the only country outside of East Asia where more than 80% of people reported wearing masks in public. In Australia, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK, fewer than 20% report wearing masks. Government mandates versus actual real-world implementation of – and adherence to – such mandates are very different things.

Perhaps mask-wearing norms are hard-won but stable? Once people are convinced of the need to wear masks, perhaps they will continue to do so? Data we have collected in Bangladesh and rural Nepal suggests the dynamics are far more complex.

Investigating mask use in the Bangladeshi context is also crucial. Given the population density and the limited availability of covid-ready health care units, preventative measures are imperative. In preparation for a randomised controlled trial to evaluate the impact of mask use on the spread of respiratory illnesses in Bangladesh, we assembled researchers from Yale, Stanford, UC Berkeley, North South University and Innovations for Poverty Action to look at many different pieces of data on mask use. One study by LightCastle Partners suggested that, in Dhaka, 12% of respondents regularly wore masks as of 5–7 April 2020. Around this time, the number of official covid-19 cases in Bangladesh was between 50 and 200, and the number of (untested) infections surely much larger.

As Bangladesh initiated a lockdown, the government issued a strong directive recommending that everyone wear a mask in public, and police and local officials enforced this policy through shaming



and regulatory actions. Anecdotally, we heard that mask use was rapidly increasing. We surveyed 2,500 people in both urban and rural areas throughout Bangladesh by phone on 22 April 2020: 97% reported owning a mask, with near-uniform adoption across every region of the country. We worried that people might be telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, so we also asked them to estimate what fraction of other people they encountered in public were wearing masks. This too was consistently above 80%. Contemporary surveys in Ghana, India and Nepal showed similarly rapid increases in mask usage. At the time, there were 400 reported covid-19 cases in Bangladesh.

In light of this evidence, we decided that the problem of mask use in Bangladesh had been solved. Not only that, but the pattern boded

well for the rest of the world. Perhaps, except in countries like the UK and the US, where mask use had become heavily politicized, mask adoption would be quick as the threat of covid-19 became apparent.

It turns out we were completely mistaken. A few weeks later, we began to hear anecdotal reports that conflicted with our original survey. Our collaborators in Bangladesh suggested that local officials had stopped publicly enforcing mask use and that many people appeared to be walking around in public without masks. From 21–23 May, we conducted a second telephone survey. In this, 86% of people reported that they wore a mask in public. But there was an ominous result: survey respondents reported that only 60% of other people they saw in public were wearing masks.

Given concerns about self-reported survey responses, we conducted a massive data-gathering exercise where we used direct observation to determine the ground-truth. We sent surveyors to more than 1,400 public locations throughout Bangladesh and had them count the number of people they saw with and without masks. They counted

more than 150,000 people. Of these, 48% were wearing masks. In mosques – indoor spaces where transmission concerns are especially severe – only 37% wore masks. As of 23 May, there were 32,000 confirmed covid-19 cases in Bangladesh. The risk was direr than ever but mask use had faded owing to a mix of complacency and relaxed messaging and enforcement.

The idea that mask norms are hard to change but stable once achieved is not correct: the data in Bangladesh indicates that norms can change rapidly in both directions. In the world's poorest countries, the problem is not just one of providing masks but also of creating conditions that support consistent mask use. What does that support look like? In addition to distribution and availability, we need clear, consistent

The idea that mask norms are hard to change but stable once achieved is not correct: the data in Bangladesh indicates that norms can change rapidly in both directions.

messaging to underscore the importance of mask use, and we need enforcement by local officials and communities. Enforcement need not mean punishing those without masks, but rather having trusted community leaders like mosque imams and headmasters make direct appeals, asking those without masks to please put one on and providing them with a mask if they do not have one.

The benefits of mask use in Bangladesh also must be better understood. It is one thing to know that masks have the potential to prevent disease; it is another to know they work effectively for active members of the community. Concrete knowledge of the protective effects of masks for both individuals and the people they care about may be important for lasting uptake. It is also key for policy-makers to understand the full ramifications of how they allocate their resources to different covid-19 prevention and mitigation strategies.

To contribute to tangible, evidence-based covid-19 prevention policies, we are now embarking on a rapid results research study throughout Bangladesh. The primary goals are to ascertain the value of day-to-day mask use in preventing transmission and which policies and types of mask effectively encourage regular mask use. In Bangladesh, we are testing several possible messaging interventions in mosques and markets. In villages, we will test mask distribution methods and social incentives. In all cases, the study will evaluate both whether these interventions increase mask use (measured by direct observation by our surveyors) and whether they impede the spread of respiratory disease, measured by reported symptoms and temperature readings.

The disastrous public health and economic consequences of covid-19 call for large-scale government responses to fight the disease. Government spending on testing and tracing, vaccine testing and development and protective equipment for health care workers lags far behind where it should be. Masks are among the lowest-hanging fruit in terms of financial cost. Cloth masks cost less than a dollar to produce and preliminary research indicates each person who wears one generates thousands of dollars in health benefits. But promoting mask uptake requires the coordination of official

mandates and recommendations, distribution, communication and enforcement. Mask adoption is a more complex problem than it seems at first glance, but it is a problem worth solving: if Bangladesh can build consistent mask-wearing norms, it can potentially save hundreds of thousands of lives at very low cost. □

Jason Abaluck is an associate professor at Yale University. He is an economist and an academician.

Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak is a professor at Yale University. He is an economist and an academician.



Cohesive education in the time of covid-19

by Aisha Binte Abdur Rob and Sudipta Roy

Bangladesh's extraordinary development trajectory has established the country as a paragon of neoliberal growth – a remarkable feat for a young nation saddled with high poverty and extreme vulnerability to disasters. This momentum has been supported by major advances with regard to improving education for a more competitive workforce, following a longstanding policy emphasis on increasing access and attainment.

In recent years, the need for qualitative

improvements has prompted a shift towards closer scrutiny of educational content and quality. However, the disruptive impact of the covid-19 pandemic has bent policy frameworks askew, both globally and in Bangladesh. School closures have exposed children and youth to massive losses in learning and grave social harms, renewing and intensifying challenges in access, content and quality. The pandemic has also triggered a wider social crisis, evoking deep reflections

on the sustainability of neoliberal growth and education's role in shaping social progress. The insights gained through the pandemic offer new policy directions and fresh impetus towards cohesive education that can support a sustainable future for Bangladesh.

Like in most emerging countries, Bangladesh's policy approach to formal education has long centred on enhancing accessibility. This focus has led to almost universal enrolment in primary education, gender parity in access and significant rises in secondary and postsecondary school enrolment. Several initiatives have also been taken to remove socioeconomic barriers to accessing education. These include free distribution of textbooks under the national curriculum since 2010 and the production of books in minority ethnic languages since 2017. Bangladesh has also introduced education programmes designed to promote equitable access, including the Ananda School Programme, the Urban Slum Children Education Programme, the Child Domestic Worker Education Programme and the Pre-Vocational Training Programme.

However, alongside massive strides in securing access, worrying levels of knowledge and skills among students have gradually drawn attention. Questions about educational content and quality have therefore risen to prominence in policy discourse. Several national-level learning assessments conducted by the government have revealed weak numeracy and literacy skills among students, with only 25–44% of students in Grades 5–8 having command over Bangla, English and mathematics.

The covid-19 pandemic has brought massive disruptions to education around the globe, and, as reported by UNESCO, the shutdown of educational institutions in 144 countries has affected 1.2 billion learners as of 1 June 2020. In Bangladesh, the closure of educational institutions since 17 March 2020 has resulted in the loss of learning opportunities for 36 million schoolchildren. Such aggravated interruptions can have serious and long-term implications, especially for marginalised children whose foundational literacy and numeracy skills are already compromised.

In addition to the learning setbacks, school closure is also causing impoverished girls, displaced and differently abled children to suffer losses in social protection, health care, nutrition and psychosocial support. Moreover, studies by Manusher Jonno Foundation, UN Women and Plan International point to rising levels of child marriage, child labour and violence against children. This suggests potentially irrecoverable losses in education and irreparable damage to children's lives.

Bangladesh's response

Bangladesh has responded to this crisis with a robust set of infrastructural adaptations, involving the engagement of schoolchildren through various distance learning platforms, such as television, internet, mobile phones and radio. Pre-recorded lessons are being offered to primary and secondary students, as well as technical and Madrasah students, through electronic media platforms such as television. All these commendable initiatives can help maintain access to learning and ensure children retain knowledge and skills in the short term. Bangladesh's decades of experience in providing education in emergencies and hydro-meteorological disasters such as cyclones and floods have facilitated an early response to the pandemic.

This history of adaptivity to disasters is an encouraging precedent in the current turmoil but it is also important to acknowledge that this pandemic is unmatched in both gravity and scale, separate from the usually location-defined nature of previous disasters. Therefore, education policy-makers ought to prepare longer-term policy solutions to the deep level of damage wrought by the pandemic, such as high economic costs and social isolation. The wide digital as well as social divides in Bangladeshi society have reopened socioeconomic and sociocultural gaps, reinstating access to and quality of education as policy priorities.

The covid-19 pandemic's disastrous consequences for public health have necessitated countrywide shutdowns of educational institutions and social distancing measures that have severely constrained efforts to safeguard children. The virus has also demonstrated its potency as a vector of social discord, launching an ongoing assault on some of the fundamental precepts of social morality in Bangladeshi society.

Pandemic-induced setbacks

Bangladesh Peace Observatory has documented incidents of abandonment by family members and/or colleagues associated with covid-19 infection, harassment/assault and forced eviction resulting from social stigma around infection, as well as social stigma towards medical professionals and refusal to bury. Such incidents strike at the core of social values, including family unity, comity between neighbours, compassion towards the sick, respect towards caregivers and honour for the deceased. This trend thus exposes the moral decay in core social institutions. It also runs the risk of obliterating social harmony in the middle of this overarching ethos of social isolation. Children are generally highly perceptive

as well as susceptible to social cues from a very early age, which may leave lasting impacts.

The scale of the pandemic has also revealed the pervasiveness of social inequalities: according to the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, Bangladesh's poverty rate is likely to rise from 20.5% to 40.9%. Even with the economy reopening since 1 June, experts at the Economic Development Research Organization have predicted that the pandemic may cause 16.5 million people to fall below the poverty line, of whom 5 million may descend into extreme poverty.

Entrenched societal gender biases have also exposed women and girls to increased gendered harms and violence, as various studies affirm, including by Manusher Jonno Foundation. Furthermore, the crisis has deepened existing fissures in Bangladeshi society. Disinformation and hate speech are on the rise and minority groups are being subjected to increased marginalisation and discrimination, as indicated by findings from UNDP's Rumour and Intolerance Monitor.

The covid-19 crisis points to unmistakable insights into the ways in which social tensions sap relationships and colour politics. It also, however, hints at ways for Bangladesh to reenergise and build on the social strengths that are central features of national identity. Social cohesion education can address the unsustainable social conditions that threaten collective wellbeing and exacerbate social tensions. Such education can ground the values that bind society across group divides, upholding pluralism, equality and justice. This gives education a key role in fostering social cohesion.

As the widening ruptures in the social fabric become clearer during this crisis, the covid-19 moment also holds the promise of a more resilient and sustainable future. Variouslly dubbed as a potential "great reset" and an opportunity to "build back better," the crisis offers a decisive break from unsustainable practices and a chance to collectively rethink the terms of social progress. For social cohesion education in Bangladesh, the opportunity is twofold: the impetus for reconstructing unsustainable social structures pairs with the forthcoming curriculum review in 2022. Together, these are uniquely enabling conditions for rebuilding education as a pillar of social cohesion.

Addressing existing ruptures

Education can fulfil this role by inculcating cohesive values among children through, for instance, educational materials like textbooks. This is integral to the social purposes of education, which go beyond building a competitive workforce. In addition to the economic purpose of developing students to

improve individual and collective living standards, education has important humanistic, civic and social justice purposes that advance nation-building. Thus, looking to the future, an especially promising path is education reform that builds on explicit, Bangladesh-anchored approaches to citizenship curricula that draw on Bangladeshi cultures of interreligious appreciation and harmony alongside a historic commitment to balance and mutual respect among communities.

An important starting point in conceptualising such reforms can be found in studies on social cohesion within Bangladesh's education system. A 2019 review by the Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue at Georgetown University, US, analysed National Curriculum and Textbook Board textbooks based on social cohesion criteria. It identified important areas where textbook reforms could support the central goal of promoting social cohesion and, less positively, address social tensions that the covid-19 crisis has accentuated. The study examined 22 textbooks selected from the 2019 national curriculum, covering the subjects of language/literature, social science and religion, across Grades 3, 5 and 7.

The language textbooks revealed an emphasis on the majoritarian ethos – that is, the Muslim–Bengali experience. They tend to obscure the ethnic and cultural diversity of Bangladeshi society and there is an exclusive focus on an Islamic worldview. Hence, there is limited scope for learning to appreciate diverse cultures and religions.

The social studies textbooks miss opportunities to advance central social cohesion objectives. They portray minority ethnic groups as peripheral to Bangladesh's historical narratives and social life.

The religious textbooks, each focusing solely on one of the four major religions in Bangladesh, proclaim the superiority of the faith tradition in focus. Some content is explicitly or implicitly derogatory towards certain religions. Moral teachings in these textbooks derive only from particular religions and lack common, unifying themes.

Across the different subjects and grades, biased gender norms appear recurrently, interspersed by some instances of gender tokenism. Similarly, social inequality is recognised at various junctions in the texts but is not developed

as part of a social justice narrative. Thus, the present composition of textbooks reveals a potential to exacerbate social tensions – but thereby also presents scope for improvement from a social cohesion perspective.

The religious textbooks, each focusing solely on one of the four major religions in Bangladesh, proclaim the superiority of the faith tradition in focus.



The reform agenda

The pandemic threatens to deepen social ruptures by exacerbating existing fault lines among groups and communities. On the other hand, the ensuing upheaval has produced unprecedented momentum to reshape the agenda for social progress. Therefore, policy-makers have both the opportunity and the challenge of taking proactive steps to tackle the sustainable transformation of the education sector. Our research findings point to several steps that could ensure that the education system enhances social cohesion in Bangladesh, strengthening collective resilience to crises such as the current pandemic. Observations from both textual analysis and subsequent policy engagement activities on this issue include the following:

1. The immediate adverse social impact of the pandemic can be addressed through deliberate teachings that reinforce critical social values through the technological platforms being used for education during the pandemic. Religious sources, interfaith approaches and both faith-based and secular morality can be drawn upon in producing such teaching materials.
2. The upcoming curriculum review in 2022 should foreground a more explicit focus on social values in the curriculum. As a priority, humanistic virtues should be framed in universal terms, both to address the pandemic's impact and to develop a broader moral narrative around social crises.
3. The 2022 curriculum review offers the opportunity to revise textbooks through a consistent lens of socially cohesion. Mandatory education on cohesive values should be included, along with nuanced reflections on social tensions in Bangladesh. Textbooks can provide opportunities for interfaith and intercultural learning.
4. Building on and beyond ongoing efforts to expand digital access to education, the forthcoming curriculum review could introduce pedagogical changes to limit unequal losses in learning caused by the digital divide. Textbooks could thus include more content for self-directed learning and assessment, developing independent thinking and self-evaluation skills.

5. New training programmes for teachers and textbook writers can focus on raising the quality of cohesive education. Recruitment policies can also be aligned with social cohesion objectives. The teachers' guide to be produced in 2021 based on the new curriculum can offer an early start on improving teaching for social cohesion outcomes.

6. Effective partnerships between schools and other social institutions should be encouraged with an explicit view to augmenting social cohesion.

This can include, for instance, supporting youth organisations that serve progressive social goals and facilitating youth engagement in social platforms for dialogue and positive action.

7. In budget adjustments necessitated by the covid-19 emergency, programmes for minorities and disadvantaged children should receive priority.

8. The government should consider supplementary support to teachers from minority backgrounds and those involved in multilingual education.

End remarks

The importance of innovative and lasting policy solutions to covid-19 pandemic's impacts on Bangladesh's education sector must be reiterated. This will require first and foremost a nuanced, evidence-based appreciation of the current strengths and weaknesses of the education system. Current policies and practices are still premised on "normal" conditions, but these are critically challenged in this unprecedented time. While the pandemic's devastating impacts put at risk some of the achievements of the education sector, the disruption also offers opportunities for policy-makers and other stakeholders to reflect on how education, as a public good, can contribute meaningfully to the making of a cohesive and pluralistic Bangladeshi society. □

Aisha Binte Abdur Rob is a research associate at the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), BRAC University, Bangladesh. She is a social science researcher.

Sudipta Roy is a research associate at the World Faiths Development Dialogue located at Georgetown University. He is a sociologist.



Insights into the **rural non-farm** sector of Bangladesh

by K. A. S. Murshid

Traditionally, the rural non-farm (RNF) sector in Bangladesh consisted of an assortment of rural households dependent on a variety of livelihoods: artisans, barbers, petty food processors and vendors, craftspeople, dairy workers, potters, tinkers, tailors and carpenters. They relied on the custom of the vast farming population to whose demands they tried to cater. However, low productivity and rural incomes meant demand for the services of these non-farm groups was limited and unstable, making their livelihoods precarious. This was the state of RNF in the 1960s and 1970s, before the advent of the Green Revolution.

In the context of poverty alleviation, non-farm earnings have been found to lead to an absolute improvement in the incomes of the poor, suggesting that a dynamic RNF sector will have a strong anti-poverty impact. Subsequent studies have confirmed the positive effect on rural incomes and poverty. Over a 20-year period, between 1991 and 2011, the moderate poverty headcount declined from 78% to 27.5%, while extreme poverty declined from 64.8% to 14%.

RNF adopters experienced faster growth in income and a faster decline in poverty. RNF incomes grew 29% faster than farm incomes while the decline in poverty for RNF was 8% faster. During the same 20-year period, findings of economists Mark Pitt and Shahidur Khandker further show that the growth in RNF was led by the farm sector: a 10% income in farm incomes increased RNF incomes by 6%; within RNF, the role of the enterprise sector was most important.

Thus, from the Green Revolution, RNF began to diversify and expand, giving rise to new activities, livelihoods and earning opportunities in the wake of the introduction of new rice varieties that require modern irrigation and water control, and use of complementary seed/fertiliser inputs.¹

At the same time, rural Bangladesh began to experience resource inflows via international remittances and microcredit from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which boosted rural demand for goods and services. Rural areas also experienced investment in a range of activities such as aquaculture and poultry, as well as in irrigation equipment and agricultural machinery.

Growing urbanisation and industrialisation also encouraged RNF, especially in areas well connected to major urban centres. As the urban industrial labour force

expanded, rural areas forged even closer linkages with urban areas. Domestic remittances expanded quickly as urban industrial workers sent much of their savings back home to their families in the villages, in much the same way as wage-earners working abroad. In other words, rural areas witnessed an unprecedented inflow of resources into the economy, which stimulated investment, employment and wages.

Rural Bangladesh today has thus transformed significantly with the growth in rural industry and enterprises (e.g. automatic rice mills, cold stores, repair shops, modern food processing enterprises, mobile recharge shops, fintech services) and spectacular expansion of the non-crop sectors. The contribution of RNF, however, rarely figures in current development narratives². This article therefore outlines the historical role of RNF with reference to structure, employment, wages and incomes, especially of the poor and women, and its outlook in a post-covid-19 world.

Employment in RNF

During the 1980s and 1990s RNF expanded slowly, registering growth of just 3.2% between 1983/84 and 1990/91. Nevertheless, its contribution to employment was large. For example, a micro study from two villages in Manikganj district near Dhaka in 1981/82 showed that non-agricultural households made up around 35% of all rural households. However, both farm and

Table 1

Structure of agricultural and rural employment in 1994/95 versus 1987/88 (%)

Sector	1987/88	1994/95	Change
Agriculture	65.5	55.3	-0.4
Crops	42.9	37	-0.1
Wage labour in agriculture	21.9	16.8	-1.7
Other agriculture	0.8	1.5	10.5
Non-Agriculture	34.5	44.7	5.9
Trade	9.2	11.7	5.7
Services	16.2	20.5	5.5
Other non-agriculture	9.0	12.5	6.8

Source: Hossain, M. (2004) "Rural Non-Farm Economy: Evidence from Household Surveys". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(36), 4053–4058

Table 2

Rural employment between 1995 and 2010 (%)

Sector	1995	2000	2005	2010
Farm employment	60.4	63.1	56.8	55.2
Crop	54.6	55.2	52.9	49.2
Non-crop	5.7	7.9	3.9	5.9
Non-Farm employment	39.6	36.9	43.2	44.8

Source: Household Income and Expenditure Survey of Bangladesh, various years

¹ Zaid Bakht of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies has described RNF as dominant and growing, with traditional cottage industries on the decline but manufacturing, led by small-scale industry, increasing quickly. The other two major areas for RNF are trading and personal services.

² Observers are much more prone to talk about the achievements of the readymade garment sector, the Green Revolution, international migration and remittances, or the role of NGOs in health, education and gender rights in the context of Bangladesh's development journey.

non-farm households performed agricultural and non-agricultural work, albeit at different rates. Land-owning farm households were mostly self-employed, whereas non-farm households combined self-employment with a lot of wage work. Thus, in the early 1980s, self-employment was widespread for all rural households (over 70%) whereas wage-based work was limited mostly to the landless and to non-farm households.

National-level data confirm the importance of RNF. According to a joint study by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and the International Rice Research Institute, the employment share of RNF was 34.5% in 1987/88. Estimates based on Census data put this figure at 37.9% in 1991. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics-based estimates are similar. From the late 1980s, non-farm employment began to rise, reaching almost 45% by the mid-1990s.

Rural employment trends between 1987/88 and 1994/95 reveals three points: 1) employment in crop agriculture declined, while it increased in non-agriculture; 2) employment in “other agriculture” – poultry, dairy and fisheries – actually registered the highest growth, at over 10%; 3) in “non-agriculture,” the fastest growth was seen in “other non-agriculture” – basically rural industry, especially handlooms.

After 1995, the trend of further expansion of RNF employment continued. The sector expanded its share of employment by more than 5 percentage points. The Labour Force Survey of 2016/17, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, estimated RNF at 59% – a huge increase from even the 2010 level. In other words, the preponderance of agriculture-dependent employment had shifted decisively away into non-agricultural work in rural areas. This speaks of a structural change in the rural labour market that likely reflects a substantial realignment of livelihoods.

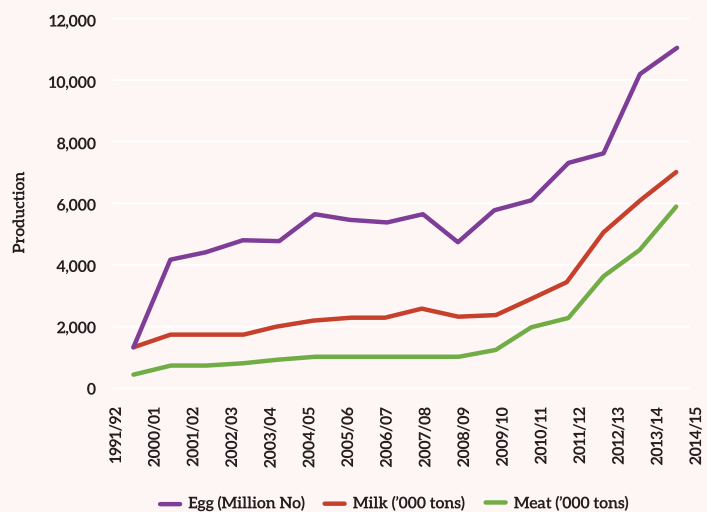
The question is what is driving these changes. If it is leading to increased employment and higher incomes, then it is likely to be related to higher productivity. It could also indicate a move away from land as a source of

livelihoods in rural areas. Perhaps this may be a rural development journey that does not have to depend on access to land in a land-scarce Bangladesh.

Explaining the dynamics

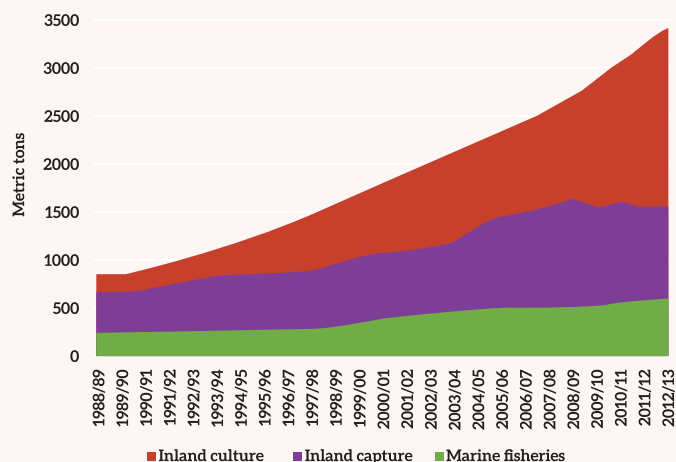
The RNF sector has grown and is currently making a significant contribution to rural employment. Factors explaining the rise in RNF include the Green Revolution, which started in the 1970s; microcredit

Figure 1
Dairy and poultry and meat production trends, 1991/92–2014/15



Source: Deb, U. (2016) “Agricultural Transformation in Bangladesh: Extent, Drivers and Implications”. 15th National Conference of the BAEA on Transformation of the Agriculture Sector in Bangladesh: 21st Century, Dhaka, 22–23 January

Figure 2
The blue revolution, 1988/89–2012/13



Source: Deb (2016)



and non-farm enterprises; and the exit from land-based work. Notably, a 2019 paper by development economist Kazi Iqbal (“The Rural Non-Farm Sector in Bangladesh, A Review”) did not find any strong evidence of remittances affecting RNF incomes or employment. In other words, although researchers have noted the expansion of RNF, explanations as to how RNF has managed to take off are few and far between.

RNF is unlikely to have emerged on its own. With the onset of the Green Revolution, new demand was created for a host of services. For example, irrigation pumps needed to be procured, installed, maintained and serviced. Similarly, fertiliser and pesticides were in high demand – an entire supply chain needed to be established throughout the country. Meanwhile, as agricultural mechanisation sped up, demand was created for power tillers, tractors, threshers and harvesters – again creating many new opportunities for livelihoods. Similarly, new kinds of entrepreneurship developed around irrigation equipment, leading to the emergence of a rental market.

Rural Bangladesh also witnessed a number of other “revolutions.” The “blue revolution” in aquaculture has been phenomenal. On the back of aquaculture, numerous RNF activities emerged related to processing and trading fish. Similar successes can be reported for poultry, dairy, mushrooms, flowers, fruits and horticulture – indeed, modern agriculture based on hydroponics and greenhouses is also emerging. These changes in the economy, similar in principle to those during the Green Revolution, have strong linkages with the RNF sector.

The opportunities provided by the expansion have been made much more accessible by the liquidity now available in rural areas, in part assisted by domestic and international remittances, rural banking and microcredit.

Public investments and the work of NGOs cannot be overlooked either. Investments in education, health, rural infrastructure, rural electrification and solar home systems have all generated considerable RNF activity. Private sector investments in agent banking, mobile financial services, agro-processing industries, rice mills, storage units, mobile phone networks and transport, along with growing rural demand for consumer durables, have joined traditional NGO-

led activities for the poor and women in the rural areas. It is therefore not by accident that rural self-employment has now given way to salaried work as the dominant type of RNF employment.

It was thus a convergence of many forces that served to dynamise agriculture, which in turn led to a dynamic RNF sector. The early decades were difficult, with development finance severely hamstrung and overly dependent on foreign aid, but domestic resources have gradually replaced this external assistance. Unthinkable in the 1980s, Bangladesh has now been able to narrow the gap that resulted from inadequate savings and scarce foreign exchange.

Looking ahead

The way forward now is to attract and embrace technology in areas of Bangladesh's comparative advantage. Bangladesh is young, entrepreneurial and not risk-averse. In other words, it is blessed with a young population that can lead the country to the next phase of development. In agriculture and RNF, the road will almost certainly lie in high-value agri-production and processing, and related services, which will be skill- and technology-intensive. This will require massive investments in human capital and market infrastructure. At the same time, our financial systems must address the demand of small rural entrepreneurs and modern farmers – a segment that has historically been difficult to reach. The emergence of fintech should mean these outreach issues will soon come to an end – although considerable prodding by policy-makers may be required for this to succeed.

One of the most important lessons of covid-19 is that agriculture and the RNF sector cannot be ignored. In moments of crisis, it is precisely these sectors that will impart a certain resilience and stability to the domestic economy and livelihoods, enabling Bangladesh to absorb shocks much more confidently. Future development strategy must continue to attach a high priority to modern, high-value agriculture and agro-processing, storage and marketing. These are the next logical steps for a post-covid-19 world. □

K. A. S. Murshid is the Director General at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. He is a researcher, an academic and an economist.



Job creation and inclusive growth as the agenda for covid-19 recovery

by Imran Ahmed and Syed Mafiz Kamal

The effects of the covid-19 pandemic go beyond health implications to include vital socioeconomic factors. Measures to reduce the spread of the pandemic, such as movement restrictions, partial shutdowns and social distancing, have had an immediate impact on labour-intensive jobs. Factories, farms, retails, tourism, transportation and marketing chains have been the most affected. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has also weathered a series of natural disasters since the onset of the pandemic.

The economic response has been swift, largely through measures, popularised as “packages,” to stimulate various segments of the economy. However, a diagnosis of the economy shows that, while the general economy has withstood the headwinds of the

crisis, many jobs have been lost. This article focuses on relatively quick ways to bring jobs back to pre-pandemic levels.

How the MSME and informal sectors have taken the hardest hit

The informal sector in particular has taken a nosedive. In Bangladesh, some 84% of the 60 million-strong labour force still engages in some form of informal self-employment or “low-income” employment, such as subsistence farming, daily wage construction, transport services or urban street hawking. These jobs are disproportionately skewed towards the low-skilled, low-income segment of the

population. Workers and entrepreneurs from this segment come from households with low savings, limited access to liquidity and no health insurance.

Some 51 million workers, including seasonal agriculture workers, are engaged in the informal economy. In the Bangladeshi labour market, there is strong overlap between the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprise) sector and the informal sector. Low-income and/or labour-intensive jobs, which represent most of those in the informal sector and a significant share of MSMEs, have been most affected. While many of these jobs have returned as the economy has picked up, some job losses have been permanent. For example, the hospitality sector has suffered the most as a result of the pandemic and there have been severe impacts on jobs associated with the sector.

A snapshot of the impacts on jobs

According to estimates by the Centre for Research and Information, “permanent” job losses are as high as 6 million, which would nearly double the unemployment rate. This sudden increase in unemployment as a result of covid-19 restrictions, floods and other natural disasters has created a subsection named the “new poor.” These are people who have fallen back below the poverty line as a result of an income loss caused by covid-19 and other, natural disaster-related, economic disruptions. The poverty rate has spiked by 22 percentage points. The new poverty will also reduce as the economy renormalises.

Setting priorities for the track to recovery

The first order of business is to bring jobs back to pre-covid-19 levels. Policy-makers have announced a combination of fiscal and monetary stimulus measures – collectively amounting to more than USD 14 billion (4.3% of gross domestic product). The stimulus is the largest economic response in the history of Bangladesh and is quite comprehensive in nature as it is targeted to reenergise, and inject much-needed liquidity into, the most critical sectors.

As the impact of the stimulus is debated in different quarters, one point is certain: a jobless recovery will put the progress of the past decade at risk, especially in the context of a

country with a high youth population. Along with smart implementation of the stimulus packages, smart spending is required to create low-skill, low-income jobs, which are critical to inclusive growth for the recovery period. Some key points focused on job creation, many of which are already under partial implementation, for policy-makers are as follows:

1. Provide additional incentives to labour-intensive subsectors in which Bangladesh could fill domestic demand, and export excess supply where applicable. The agriculture sector, including the livestock and fisheries subsectors, stands out as the largest

As the impact of the stimulus is debated in different quarters, one point is certain: a jobless recovery will put the progress of the past decade at risk, especially in the context of a country with a high youth population.

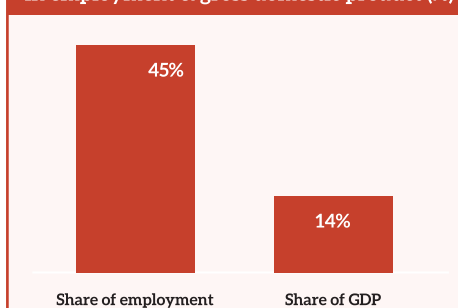
contributor to total employment, at 41%, while contributing only 13.7% to gross domestic product. In addition, if domestic demand is met, there is an opportunity to export produce. Other relevant high employment-generating sectors include construction, medical goods and equipment manufacturing, food processing, transport and logistics, retail trade, pharmaceuticals and health care.

2. Identify and accelerate labour-intensive infrastructure projects and renew their timeline. Resource mobilisation through reprioritisation can help fast-track labour-intensive public infrastructure projects such as Padma Multipurpose Bridge, Dhaka Metrorail, Karnaphuli Underwater Tunnel and Dhaka Elevated Expressway, to name a few. Local government bodies should be pressured to expedite urban and rural infrastructure projects including road repair, street light installation and irrigation facility maintenance. Employment-oriented local

government programmes such as food-for-work and full-wage local job schemes can be utilised to get these projects going.

3. Provide immediate access to finance for informal sector MSMEs that don't have access to banks. While stimulus packages have been announced to reenergise this sector, anecdotal evidence suggests implementation of policies has been sluggish. Most informal MSMEs continue to struggle with access to finance. Government can leverage the rural development financing institution Palli Karma

Figure 1
Bangladesh's agro-economy: share in employment & gross domestic product (%)



Source: National Accounts 2019, Labour Force Survey 2016/17; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

Table 1
Key industries to consider for policy-makers: a qualitative analysis

	LEAST MOST					
Industry	Employment	Income	Spillover	Low-skill jobs	Rural presence	Export friendly
Livestock						
Fishery						
Crop						
RMG						
Protective Medical goods Manufacturing						
Food processing						
Construction						
Retail Trade						
Logistics						
Transport						
Light Engineering & Medical equipment						
Healthcare						

Sahayak Foundation along with banks, and channel additional funds to refinance businesses through partner microfinance institutions to their existing MSME clients. An integrated strategy of digital finance services, formalised banking incorporation and shared risk in loan provision can be implemented through the disbursement.

4. Refocus skills development programmes to train health care workers and upskill returning remittance workers. Demand for trained caregivers is already at a peak in developed economies, as a result of their ageing populations, and this will only increase as the world recovers from the pandemic. There is also scope for upskilling our agriculture workers. Demand from African countries for skilled agriculture workers is an opportunity for Bangladesh. The government has already committed to providing loans to returnee migrant workers to pursue viable income activities. These subsidised loans along with upskilling training programmes and technical support will help establish new MSMEs locally.

5. Fast-track the Amar Gram, Amar Shohor initiative to promote localised economic activity and job creation. Pushing the decentralisation agenda can be an underlying target of the stimulus. As part of the agenda, farm mechanisation can be effectively enhanced. This will have a multiplier effect on the development of local economies.

A window of opportunity to attract global market players

Now is the ideal time for Bangladesh Investment Development Authority to aggressively follow India and Vietnam and actively woo global producers to come to our economic zones as they relocate manufacturing

facilities from China, from where many are set to move in post-pandemic times. Vietnam has already tapped into a section of this investment. Bangladesh can also get involved, especially in attracting labour-intensive units, within the next year. The government should aim for the completion of three economic zones by the end of the year. A revamped “Brand Bangladesh” marketing strategy can be followed. There are already good prospects for investment, and the government is very well positioned to tap investments from China, the European Union, Japan and the US.

The short-term agenda will have long-term impacts

Job creation and inclusive growth must be the centrepiece of the recovery workstream. Otherwise, the demographic dividend that we have been enjoying could quickly turn into a demographic liability. As health safety concerns and social distancing define the near future of work, policy-makers must take into account the new normal and a working population that is young and less skilled, with a limited safety net. Bangladesh has surprised many with its resilience to covid-19, and its development record in the past decade has been praiseworthy. Sectoral targeting, smart investment and efficient implementation in the coming year will be crucial not just for immediate recovery but also for the long run, as Bangladesh solidifies its position as a middle-income country. □

Imran Ahmed is Deputy Executive Director at Shakti Foundation. He is an economist and a development practitioner.

Syed Mafiz Kamal is the Senior Analyst at Centre for Research and Information. He is an economist and a policy researcher.



Geopolitical consequences of covid-19

Rethinking diplomacy

in Bangladesh

by Shahidul Haque and Nashita Behroz Jalil

Historically, the consequences of pandemics have always been ground-shifting. With drastic increases in mortality and morbidity, they have led to significant economic, social and political disruption on a global scale. Pandemics recorded in history such as the plague of 1720, cholera in 1820 and Spanish flu in 1920 have challenged and changed societies, and state behaviours. The coronavirus-driven pandemic will not be an exception.

The coronavirus was first reported in Wuhan, China, on 31 December 2019. After only a few months, on 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak a pandemic. The situation seemed stark: one French diplomat, Michel

Duclos, made a clear assertion at the onset of the outbreak: "The full economic, cyclical and structural effects are not quite visible yet, but, in any case, they will be gigantic."

Covid-19 is exposing and accelerating geopolitical tensions and rivalries. It has already shifted interstate dynamics and behaviours. To forecast the scale of these transformative changes, analysis of 21st century epidemics such as SARS or MERS is not enough, as the relatively small scale of these means they offer only limited guidance in understanding the global implications of this pandemic.

Challenges to the state and the market

There have been early indications of a shift in supply chains and economic connectivity worldwide, as states have acted in a stronger and more control-oriented manner in their efforts to manage the spread and shocks of the disease. All states have adopted emergency measures to manage the crisis. Often, these responses have not been adequately planned and synchronised.

The huge economic losses the pandemic has engendered are seen as justifying these inward-looking and protective policies. However, this has also resulted in a rise in isolationism, anti-immigration sentiment and institutionalised racism. A sharp rise in nationalism and xenophobia was evident even before the covid-19 outbreak. For instance, the US was already struggling with political and cultural polarisation backed by massive inequalities in income, wealth, education and health care. When covid-19 wove through the class lines of the US, it disproportionately affected minority groups.

Meanwhile, international markets and businesses are struggling to sustain globalisation. Extended periods of economic self-isolation are forcing governments and companies to find new coping mechanisms. Rising Chinese labour costs, the China-US trade war and advances in technology meant that “traditional” global supply chains were already

Extended periods of economic self-isolation are forcing governments and companies to find new coping mechanisms.

under threat. Covid-19 lockdowns have increased the enormity of these losses, according to Guan et al. (2020), writing on “Global Supply-Chain Effects of COVID-19 Control Measures”. Companies have been compelled to shrink their previously multistep, multinational supply chains in order to survive. In Bangladesh, according to Dutta (2020) (“Covid-19: An Impending Threat for Bangladesh”), not only has the supply chain of raw materials to readymade garments been disrupted but also global buyers’ demand for such products has dropped significantly.

Challenges to migrants

The pandemic has disproportionately affected the vulnerable and marginalised segment of the population, including migrants and refugees. The vulnerabilities of international migrants, who number around 272 million, have worsened under covid-19, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). As governments attempt to “flatten the curve” of infections, by

means of travel restrictions, entry prohibition or even closing borders, migration and mobility have slowed significantly. Refugees are bound by mobility restrictions, with IOM and UNHCR temporarily suspending resettlement programmes.

Changes in global politics

The pandemic has reinforced existing challenges of unequal power dynamics and tensions among states in relation to regional interconnectedness. India has taken the initiative to reassert its leadership in South Asia, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi convening a video conference of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation states to collectively fight the threats the covid-19 has brought about. However, South Asian collaboration has weakened in recent times, primarily as a result of India-Pakistan tensions. Some countries have started looking beyond South Asia for inspiration, according to Adhikari (2020) (Responding to Covid-19: The Coming of Age of Regionalism in Asia?)

Globally, there has been a shift in the “balance of power” from the West to the East, which may point to the creation of a multipolar world. In Asia, South Korea and Singapore have responded ably to the crisis; China has followed suit, reacting efficiently after early missteps. Counterparts in Europe and North America have been rather more haphazard in their approaches. China and South Korea, which used to be recipients of aid, are now assisting the World Health Organization as well as Italy and other European countries to cope with covid-19. Médecins Sans Frontières, whose assistance has historically been delivered mostly in poor and conflict areas, is now deploying medical camps in Brussels and other locations in developed countries (see Igoe and Chadwick, 2020, “After the Pandemic: How Will COVID-19 Transform Global Health and Development?”)

The post-pandemic liberal order

The pandemic is reshaping the liberal world order established in the wake of World War II. Multilateralism and international legal regimes are coming under threat. Isolationist and inward-looking policies are gaining ground in many of the countries that were the forerunners of the liberal order. Even the European Union project is under scrutiny, having failed to meet its own principles of solidarity and cooperation in the early stage of the crisis.

Meanwhile, with some states using this crisis as an instrument to assert power, the international institutional architecture is in a dilemma, with the impartial status of international organisations coming into question. The multilateral financial system, led by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, is failing to share resources equally.

The global rules-based open and free economy, centred in the World Trade Organization and regional trade agreements, is losing its relevance with the rise of protectionism.

According to former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 2020, “The pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people.”

It is increasingly felt that a focus on regional, trans-regional and sub-regional cooperation could provide a way out of the inertia regarding the great collaborative initiatives of the past. There is a need to adapt to this new arena; in particular, diplomatic practices should look to change instruments, apparatus and machinery by moving towards innovation and Artificial Intelligence-enabled approaches.

Foreign policy implications for Bangladesh

Bangladesh's foreign policy has been built on the concept of “Friendship to all, malice to none,” as envisioned by the country's founding father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The aim is for the country to pursue multi-layered and interdependent partnership with its neighbours and beyond. Bangladesh embraces the principles of sovereignty and equality. It strives towards non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and for peaceful resolution of all disputes and adherence to international law and the United Nations Charter. The nation endeavours to engage in regional and global discourses on critical issues such as sustainable development, migration, climate change, the blue economy, maritime cooperation and human security. Its policies drive towards building alliances in a competitive and national interest-driven world and balancing geopolitical and geostrategic interests.

In considering ways to rethink diplomacy in the face of the global pandemic, at the World Economic Forum 2020 Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “As the world tackles such a complex scenario, we will need a new kind of approach: an approach that fosters cooperation and not isolation amongst all stakeholders.” She presented a five-point proposal on multilateralism and interstate relationships in the future:

1. New thinking on human wellbeing, climate change governance, migration and inequalities;
2. Pro-people and pro-planet business and industry;
3. Use of technology to build a better world;
4. Robust global leadership to reenergise multilateralism and partnership; and
5. A global compact to share responsibility.

Conclusion

When rethinking diplomacy in the covid-19 context, critical strategic thinking and management are crucial. In assessing the geopolitical twists and turns in Asia, Bangladesh must remain pragmatic and balanced, pursuing national interests without abandoning its international obligations. After all, diplomacy has always been about strategically managing the unthinkable, the unknown and the unknowable factors in interstate relations to protect national interests and people as well as the planet.

In any innovative diplomatic strategy, proactive engagement with global powers and international initiatives will be of the utmost importance for leadership that is open and progressive. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has so far demonstrated success in balancing between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, and this effort must be effectively sustained. Efforts to build co-leadership will help Bangladesh better strategise when it comes to the global discourse on critical global issues such as the Sustainable Development Goals, maritime security, migration and climate change. □

Shahidul Haque is a Senior Advisor of IOM Bangladesh, and a Senior Fellow at North South University, Bangladesh. He is a foreign policy and migration specialist.

Nashita Behroz Jalil is a research assistant at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance, Dhaka. She is a policy researcher.



Bangladesh covid-19

POLICY ACTION

TIMELINE 2020

01

Early responses and containment

- › In February, the Bangladeshi government started screening at air and land ports, and set up quarantine facilities in the adjacent areas.
- › In March, after the first case was detected, all education institutions were closed.
- › In March, a “Public Holiday” – a de facto lockdown – was announced with a strategy to avoid an internal migration crisis.
- › In April, as a rapid measure, 31 essential executive directives on health protocols, awareness-building, food security and community market regulation were issued.
- › In October, based on the risk of a winter resurgence, the Bangladesh government adopted the “no mask, no service” policy at all offices and service points to contain the spread.

02

Health sector responses

- › The government’s health service agency, the Directorate General of Health Services, has been entrusted with the mandate of institutional regulation on covid-19 testing issues.
- › To ensure equal access, it has been decided to provide testing services that are subsidised and free of cost.
- › In April, isolation centres were prepared in all public hospitals in the country. Additional, 601 institutional quarantine facilities were set up.
- › In April, a publicly financed research institute for epidemiological and communicable diseases, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, was equipped to offer health advice to the public as an emergency measure.
- › The government has launched the www.corona.gov.bd web platform, which has gone on to become the go-to-point for data on the covid-19 situation in Bangladesh.
- › In April, to incentivise health sector professionals, the government decided to provide health insurance and other incentive packages to workers in high-risk situations. This was an innovative measure that has been replicated outside of Bangladesh.
- › In April, a national technical advisory committee of epidemiologists and other experts was formed to support the government to deal with the pandemic.
- › In June, the annual fiscal allocation in the health sector rose by 29%, the highest among the major sectors, for the upcoming fiscal year 2020/21. This represented a major policy shift from a resource mobilisation perspective.
- › A budgetary contingency fund of USD 1 billion has been set aside to address pandemic-related emergencies.

03

Economic safeguards

- › Since March, immediately after the announcement of movement restrictions, a series of thematic and sectoral “stimulus packages” has been put in place. The first of these was introduced on 25 March soon after the country went into lockdown. The stimulus was of USD 14 billion, equal to 4.3% of gross domestic product. As a share of gross domestic product, this was at par with many comparator and regional countries. Major focuses were on the export-oriented industries, cottage-micro-small-medium enterprises and agriculture, along with monetary measures to increase cash flow in the economy.
- › Under the stimulus credit schemes, enterprises could borrow at half-subsidised interest rates. The Central Bank eased borrowing regulations to ensure all enterprises could access working capital.
- › The Central Bank took a number of swift policy decisions to support the banking sector, by reducing the bank rate, the basic rates (REPO and reverse REPO), the cash reserve ratio and the statutory liquidity ratio, providing longer-term REPO support and expanding the advance to deposit ratio.



04

Safety net expansion

- › In April and May, to mitigate the crisis for the vulnerable population, Bangladesh launched a coordinated relief assistance programme to distribute food and cash aid to those on a low-income bracket, particularly those outside existing social security schemes.
- › In May, the government expanded its previously piloted Open Market Sales scheme, a public subsidised food selling programme, to ensure food security for the low-income population.
- › In May, a digital one-off cash distribution programme was launched using the platform of mobile financial services.
- › Certain targeted social protection initiatives, such as Vulnerable Group Development, Vulnerable Group Feeding and the rice and medicines distribution programmes, have been revamped.

05

Sustaining agriculture

- › In April, a stimulus allocation of USD 509 million to the agriculture sector was packaged to boost production and offset the impact of price hikes. This also had the aim of supporting harvesting labourers and enhancing farm mechanisation.
- › To ensure food security during the pandemic, interventions have been implemented in the supply chain. A mega procurement plan to buy eight key essential goods from the domestic and international markets has been approved. Existing public procurement of food grains has been expanded significantly.

06

Protecting the Rohingyas

- › In March, the refugee protection authority, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, suspended all activities except for essential services in the world's largest refugee settlements – the 34 Rohingya camps in south-eastern Bangladesh.
- › The government and UN agencies have prepared a scaled-up covid-19 preparedness and response plan for both the Rohingyas and host communities.



Dedicated to the vision of Digital Bangladesh





Established in 1991, Confidence Cement Limited is one of the largest producers of cement in the country. It is also a leading Blue-Chip company in both Dhaka & Chittagong Stock Exchange and has been the top 20 performing companies for the last 30 years.



Established in 2010, Confidence Batteries (CBL) was created in anticipation of a surge in demand for battery-powered transportation. With around 600,000 battery-powered vehicles on the road at the moment, CBL controls over 20% of market share in Bangladesh.



Confidence Infrastructure (CIL), Confidence Group's vehicle in the field of construction and development of new infrastructure in power, railways, telecom, road networks, dredging and river protection combines manufacturing of various middle to light engineering products with its front end services for highest amount of local value addition.



DTL is an International Gateway (IGW) service provider, offering high quality call routing and call termination facilities having its own International Internet Gateway (IIG) and National Internet Exchange (NIX). In 2019, DTL launched its ISP operations with brand name, MiME.



Started in the year 2017, Confidence Power Holdings (CPHL) now owns and manages four Independent Power Plants (IPP), two in Bogura, and one each in Rangpur and Chattogram region aspiring to take its total capacity to over 1,000MW by 2023.





“যতদিন রত্নে পদ্মা মেঘনা
গৌরী যমুনা বহমান।

ততদিন রত্নে কীৰ্তি তোমার
শেখ মুজিবুর রহমান।”