Corona and Digital Economy 2020

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By now, many people have realized that the Coronavirus pandemic will not end easily. In my March article, I said that the world will change in the future which many people are now saying. Then in the first week of April I wrote that people cannot be kept in home quarantine for long. The country will not last long with the wheel of the economy remains closed. The Prime Minister has given her thoughts on the matter quite early and so finally our economy has been or is being opened up in phases. However, the main problem of our society is that as much as the king says, the council says a hundred times. In other words, with the statement of the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister herself may not have expected to open the floodgate. Maybe again we are waiting for another statement from the Prime Minister.

Needless to say, it will not be possible to keep all the wheels of the economy shut for long. There are extremely poor people in the cities including Dhaka whose cannot simply stay home. The other day I saw a journalist on a TV channel who was harassing innocent people for not keeping distance while he himself did not maintain the distance while talking to someone! Like him, many of us sit on TV channels and utter words like “social distance”, “contact tracing”, “test-test-test” etc., as if we do not have a national language!— I have doubts whether their half Bangla-half English sentences make any sense to common people. Many of us simple have no idea about the reality of the country, which the Prime Minister rathe has. This is possible because politicians work for the people. Before going into the details, let me say that the death rate in Corona is 6.8 percent so far. This rate is higher in our country, because we still have a low number of corona tests done. However, for the sake of information, let me state that the State of New York conducts between 6 and 7 thousand tests a day.

First, the wheel of the economy must be turned on to ensure the livelihood of millions but it has to be done carefully and at all stages of movement by maintaining the physical distance (the term is not social distance). The task is huge and complex but not impossible. Some people think that it is not possible in our country to moderate the behavior of the common people. I do not agree with this assertion. Recently the mosques in the country were opened up for prayers, it was seen that they were able to observe the rules in an orderly manner. We know that most of them are not ‘educated’ like us of do not consider that the poor people are also self-educated. We often think that their intelligence is low so they cannot respond to verbal instructions. At least by praying in the mosque in an orderly fashion they have proven that they are not stupid. It is possible to bring them to follow rules. We simply need to create a well thought-out roadmap.

Second, some media outlets are reporting that people are roaming around on the street without reasons. They should be punished for doing so. The matter is extremely painful. For those who have only one room of eight feet long and five feet wide for living with children, the order to keep them quarantine at home is really painful. They cook in one place sharing with 5-10 families. Take a bath with 20-40 families and we tell them to stay at home! Stay tuned! Live separately (if affected by Corona)! Stay at home all day! The height of their room is only six feet or less. The room is made of polythene sheet! That house has no window! The door is not even a door! Forget about them, there are thousands of houses where low middle income families live where sunlight never enters! No fresh air! This is Dhaka city. Often they do not have electricity. Can they stay at home for 24 hours a day? They have been at home with no work (no food) for about a month and a half. How long can they wait?

We have to plan now to get out of this situation. We must remember that even an idiot can outsmart an intelligent man if s/he plans. So intelligence without a plan is meaningless.

How to turn the wheel of the economy following the rules? Everyone has to think about it. Otherwise the danger will increase. The shadow of death by Corona is lurking around us. A few things should be clarified before moving on to the main content. I have said before and now many are saying that no corona vaccine is coming to the market before 2022 (if it comes at all). Many of us who are hearing of the vaccine tests (clinical trial) of few companies and think that the vaccine is coming soon also know that the current tests are not done to test the effectiveness of the vaccine at all. The effectiveness test will come later. The current tests are to see if it products have any toxin impact on the human body. You may have survived a corona with this vaccine, but you may become blind! These tests of vaccines are done in a short period and in many cases are not enough. Thereafter, there will be few more rounds of human tests to test their effectiveness. After this, production and marketing will take place. Never think that as we rediscover it, we will get it. Americans did not join the World Health Organization's discussion yet to make the vaccines universal. Not only that, whoever discovers it first, will probably have to go to the courts because many countries are preparing to challenge them. Many are accusing them of stealing intellectual property.

Therefore, our main concern will be how to keep the country's production system afloat in the next one or two years. We have to think about how we will create a new social norm. We need to think more about how will it be possible in a densely populated country like ours. In a country where everyplace is crowded even inside a shop. How can we introduce the rule of maintaining distance where we can't walk the inside on shop which is packed with products. Moreover, in our country with sun and rain, will it be possible to use circles and let people stand in queue for hours like that of the western countries? We have to think differently. Our main problem is population density. Many say that 1.8 crore people work and live in Dhaka city. Excluding the open spaces in Dhaka, these 1.8 crore people live in a maximum area of ​​150 sq km. In other words, 120,000 people live in every square kilometer in Dhaka. We have to plan thoughtfully to make sure that so many people do not come out of their house every day.

Our current thinking will be on how to get industrial production get started sooner rather than that of the retail trade. The agricultural sector will continue as is. There is less need to be afraid of maintaining distance. The main industry of the country is our garment industry. They are our main part of import-export and bring dollars inside the country. The main way to overcome the collapse of the expatriate labor market will be to protect the garment sector. World markets are gradually opening up, so they will need supply of winter clothing soon. They will place a new orders. If we want these products on sale by by next October, we have to open our garments by June. In that case we will get the orders. If we can't take that orders, it will go to another country. At the same time, if thousands of garment workers are affected by coronavirus, these orders will leave our country only for health reasons. Therefore, we don't have to open up just for the sake of opening. Effective measures must be adopted to maintain personal distances in the garment factory. Surveillance will be the responsibility of the concerned owners association. Government agencies will also be there to monitor and assist them. In that case the number of workers have to be reduced. Everyone must understand the matter. Workers' accommodation is not healthy at all. Health care can be arranged at their place of residence with the help of the association. Provision for water, soap and if necessary, doctors and health care should be provided. It will be the responsibility of the government to assist the owners to provide health facilities to the workers and their families. The same system should be introduced in every industrial areas. It is very important to take special measures in industrial areas otherwise the illness of the workers will endanger the industrial production and the economy. It is very important to make sure that the industrial area does not fall into lockdown trap.

It is better not to think of starting schools and colleges before September. However, some of these issues need to be adjusted. All schools up to primary (including KG schools) will have to reduce their students by half and shall be allowed to enroll students who live within two kilometers. If they want to serve students from outside, they can open up branches in other places. That means school districts should be introduced at an early stage. Every school has to ensure this between June and September. Arrangements must be made to wash hands and maintain distance at schools. The same rule shall be applied for high schools and colleges but it will be within four kilometers instead of two kilometers. This will reduce the pressure on the transportation system. Bicycle lanes need to be introduced in the city. This will increase the movement of people on bicycles. Universities will have to reduce class size by half to ensure distances in the class. However, in their case, they have to think about how to continue the educational activities by keeping the online classes running. These activities will reduce the pressure on the transportation system. Virtual courts have already been launched for judicial proceedings, which shall continue.

All municipal services must be brought to normal, but keeping the distance and hygiene rule. Depending on the population density, at least one hand-washing toilet per kilometer should be introduced in each city, where services are available at a fixed charge. Fees have to be paid electronically. Not cash transactions. Now is the time to launch the second phase of our digital economy. I hope everyone will think about it. Since the history of vaccine discovery says that no invented vaccine comes to the market at least within 18 months after its discovery, I don't think there is any alternative for us but to continue our life for the next two to three years using a new normal.