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Pandemic impacts on children may be irreversible

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Do we know about the realities of children in newly poor households? According to a survey conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), the number of new poor in August 2021 reached 3.24 crore. However, there is lack of reliable data on various issues affecting children's lives during the pandemic in Bangladesh, although media reports and NGO surveys confirm increases in child marriage, child labour and school dropouts. Poverty is one of the major causes in all of these. It is already evident that children have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 related poverty and prolonged school closures.

Children experience poverty as an environment that is damaging to their mental, physical and intellectual development. This means that a monetary approach based on income is completely inadequate to capture child poverty and can even lead to undesirable outcomes for children. According to this approach, a standard solution to poverty is to increase income, but the increased income may not be used for expenditures that will have positive impacts on children.

The Bristol Approach to child poverty looks into child deprivations through seven critical dimensions: shelter, sanitation, safe drinking water, information, food, education and health. Children are considered poor if they suffer two or more deprivations. This was originally suggested by Peter Townsend and later developed at the University of Bristol, and has formed a crucial basis for understanding and assessing the extent of child poverty.

The concept of vulnerability is based on the recognition that people can fall into and out of poverty depending on changing situations. Social vulnerability involves an intersection of economic, political, cultural and institutional factors. It is usually dependent on access to and control over natural and social resources, access to political power and representation, cultural constructions surrounding gender, age, beliefs and norms, physical vulnerability, etc.

Childhood is the most vulnerable stage of life. It is a formative phase and a very crucial one for the development of an individual. Children's vulnerability is linked to the vulnerabilities of their parents and caregivers. If the parents lose income due to crop failure, disability or other reasons, then the children's basic needs will not be met. The lost opportunities in childhood often cannot be regained in later life. For

example, the damage suffered due to malnutrition, ill health and inadequate care during childhood affects future learning in a negative way, and often cannot be repaired. The negative effects of poverty may not be permanent in adults, but the consequences of not having basic needs fulfilled could be irreversible in children, and could hinder them from realising their full potential.

According to the PPRC-BIGD survey, the percentage of households skipping at least one meal increased significantly between March and August 2021, especially in urban slums (from two percent to eight percent) and in the Chattogram Hill Tracts (from two percent to 16 percent). The majority of the households did not have any meat, milk and fruits throughout the pandemic. If not addressed immediately, the children of these families will grow up with malnutrition and will have to face lifelong negative consequences.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Committee recommended the following in the last Concluding Observations for Bangladesh (October 2015): "The Committee recommends that the State party take all measures necessary to combat poverty and to eliminate urban/rural, social and other disparities in children's standard of living through, inter alia, social protection and targeted programmes for children and families who are particularly vulnerable to poverty, and prioritise the provision of safe drinking water and environmental sanitation."

The above recommendation is even more relevant in the context of increased poverty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure sustainable human development, child well-being must be considered as the highest priority and recognised in all national policy and planning. The government should strengthen existing social protection programmes to reduce the vulnerabilities of the poorest families by increasing coverage and financial allocation, and ensuring that the support reaches those who need it the most.

It is important to undertake comprehensive assessments of the social protection system in Bangladesh through a child rights lens. Appropriate child sensitive mechanisms should be designed and implemented. The positive and unintended impacts of social protection programmes on children should be monitored, and adjustments should be made as and when required. National and international NGOs should also make their poverty reduction programmes child sensitive.

Special attention should be given to families where children are at risk of dropping out of school, child marriage, child labour, etc. The effects of shocks, exclusion and poverty on families should be mitigated, recognising that families raising children need support. The age and gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities of children throughout the life cycle should be considered. Special provision should be made to reach children who are particularly vulnerable and excluded, including children without parental care, and those who are marginalised within their families or communities due to their gender, disability, ethnicity or other factors.

Voices and opinions of children, their parents and their caregivers should be included in the understanding and design of social protection systems and

programmes. There should be accountability mechanisms to allow them to give feedback on design and implementation.

In all relevant national surveys, data should cover all children below the age of 18 years and be disaggregated by age, sex and particularly those groups of children who are in need of special protection. In-depth and rigorous studies should be conducted on multi-dimensional issues on child well-being, child poverty and disparities.

As we rebuild our economy and society in a post-Covid-19 world, we must recognise and prioritise the specific needs of children. Addressing child poverty deserves specific attention.

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