

# BANGLADESH CASE STUDY:

## The struggle for life and livelihood amid pandemic

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### **UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative)**

#### **Introduction**

Bangladesh, a post-colonial state, has always been an experimental site of international development. Statistical numbers for global consumption are strategically deployed to project Bangladesh as a 'success story'. However, the reality is very different. The quantitative statistical parameters actually hide how neo-liberal policies has devastated the lives of people, and precariously narrowed their livelihood options. It is starkly revealed during Covid-19 pandemic. The present case study is based on the Information, analysis and understanding of concrete lives and livelihood strategies of the people during the ongoing pandemic. Lockdown is to save lives from the spread of the virus; but livelihood options were shut down as well. The question is, could the pandemic alone create such a disaster or was it there in the system?

Since its independence, after a brief period of post-liberation phase of war-torn recovery, Bangladesh followed the development path mostly dictated by the international and multilateral agencies such as World Bank, IMF and various private US led foundations. [such as Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.] In the eighties it adopted the neo-liberal development paradigm, where market dictates vital national concerns such as health, food, nutrition, livelihood and human behavior. The onset of Covid-19 pandemic made this collapse instantly visible, signaling the precarious and vulnerable conditions of all other sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic is revealing the disastrous consequences of the dismantled social and collective responsibility of the State towards its members.

The quality of growth in Bangladesh has always been a serious concern to economists. Poverty with respect to national income has been declining very fast over time, indicating the gradual ineffectiveness of growth in reducing poverty. Poverty has consequences for both morbidity and mortality, particularly death by non-communicable diseases (NCDs). According to WHO, NCDs are estimated to account for 67% of all deaths in Bangladesh. NCDs also pose the major threat in Covid-19 pandemic as co-morbidity (UBINIG, 2020).

Agriculture, despite the Bangladesh government negligence to the sector contributes over 14% to GDP and employs nearly 40% of the workforce, although the service sector provides the highest employment (44%). The readymade garment (RMG) sector is important, because it provides employment to about 4 million, 80% women. More than

10 million semi and low skilled workers find jobs in the Middle East, Europe and North America.

Bangladesh is facing contradictions in the development achieved so far. On the one hand, poverty and extreme poverty levels are declining - from country's poverty rate of 24 percent in 2016 to 22% in 2018 and the extreme poverty from 13% in 2016 to 11% in 2018. On the other hand, there is extreme inequality in the country; the top 10% of the population own 39% of the wealth and the bottom 10% only 1%. This inequality has been rising since 2010.

## **COVID-19 and its effects on the economy and people**

The first declaration of COVID -19 cases was on March 8, 2020 when three COVID-19 cases were detected among returned overseas expatriate workers . From mid-April the confirmed cases rose steadily. Bangladesh now (17 March, 2021) has 562752 corona confirmed, 8608 deaths and 515989 recovered cases.

Like other countries in the world, the government declared closure of educational institutions, government and non-government offices on 25 March, 2020 declaring it "General Holiday" without officially calling it Lockdown. Movement of all the transports was suspended. As a result, people were unable to move from one area to the other. The unofficial Lockdown was extended several times which ended on May 5, 2020. [The educational institutions are still closed till March 2021, but movement from one area to the other has become normal.](#)

The information in this case study [was](#) collected during October 2020 from various groups around the country through Zoom meetings. The information was collected from 8 districts and from over 50 persons.

## **Economic situation in the country**

In response to widespread concern regarding the intensity and duration of the pandemic, the economy was initially shut down and in May some partial openings to complete shutdowns in a localized fashion have continued depending on the intensity of the pandemic. Since early August 2020 most restrictions have been lifted. Therefore, the impact was reflected in the economy and most importantly on the lives and livelihood of the people.

There were effects of the closure of offices, government and private, educational institutions, business houses, hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, factories, etc. The Bangladesh Economic Association estimates that nearly 36 million jobs were lost during the 66 days of 'general holidays' announced by the government in a bid to contain the corona virus. Most of the job losses were in the agriculture, industry and service sectors.

Some 59.5 million Bangladeshi have been pushed down into lower/different socio-economic strata during this period. Of these, 25.5 million people are now living in extreme poverty.

The closure of all economic activities had impacted in doubling extreme poverty, raising the number of the ultra-poor from 10.5% of the population to 20.5% as of June, 2020. The incidence of poverty increased from 20.5% to 29.4% as a considerable number of people lost their income due to the corona virus fallout.

About 13 percent of people have become unemployed in the country due to Covid-19 pandemic. A survey found negative effects on employment, income and expenditures of people, especially those from low-income groups. As per the report findings, 19.2% of respondents with income less than 5,000 taka reported that their income was reduced by 75%, while 23.3% respondents with income between 5000-15000 taka reported an income reduction by 50% compared to previous month's income.

Another survey said that Bangladesh will have 16.4 million 'new poor' in 2020 as the income of the working-class in urban and rural areas has fallen sharply. The study gave a post-lockdown scenario, showing the country's overall poverty will increase by 25%, where rural poverty will be 24% and urban poverty will be 27%.

The informal sector was the most hard hit, with an estimated 80% of workers becoming unemployed. As many businesses are closing, a very large number of workers are not being able to go back to their jobs. A large number of people have been migrating from urban to rural areas. The households, in particular in rural areas, are experiencing serious financial stress causing a sharp decline in household consumption.

### **Food insecurity and Nutrition**

The loss of employment and income also led to food insecurity. A survey found that during the lockdown of March-May, 2000, 91% of sampled families considered themselves to be financially unstable. 47% saw their earnings drop below the international poverty line of Tk160 (US\$1.90) per person per day; 70% experienced food insecurity and 15% either ran out of food or remained hungry or missed meals.

According to FAO Rapid Assessment Report, 2020, prices are up significantly for most food commodities across the markets largely due to the breakdown in transportation mechanisms since the strict lockdown commenced on March 24th. Most crucially, farmgate (a big wholesale market in Dhaka) prices for producers have plummeted for many items as wholesalers have ceased to purchase from them, stating an inability to move product to the remaining open markets.

The poultry sector has taken a disproportionate hit during the crisis due to widespread beliefs that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted through poultry products. Farm gate prices

have dropped for eggs (-18%), broilers (-15%), day-old layer chicks (-75%) and day-old broiler chicks (-90%), with about 50% of eggs and 70% of broilers unsold at farms.

The prices of rice and lentils have increased significantly, which has serious implications for food security as these are the staples and most preferred foods across the country. With the same amount of money, consumers are currently getting 20% less rice. Rice is the staple food comprising over 50% by weight and 70% by calories of the total food. The lack of adequate animal source food is a major factor responsible for poor dietary and nutrient adequacy and undernutrition, particularly among mothers and young children.

The monsoon floods coupled with prolonged inundation and the COVID-19 pandemic has multiple impacts on the people. There is an important practice of social distancing and hand washing which is quite impossible to maintain as flood affected people are displaced to shelters where it is congested. The flood damage puts added distress on vulnerable and marginalized groups on their safety and security. Loss of home, restricted movement, loss of crops, transportation and communication create food insecurity and safety. Food, nutrition and livelihood in Bangladesh have been heavily affected due to Covid-19, Cyclone Amphan and monsoon floods in 2020. There has been large scale damage to productive land, and flood protection infrastructure impacting agricultural production.

## **The effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on hunger and starvation**

[In the following section, field based information are presented depicting the effects of COVID-19 and the Lockdown measures leading to unemployment and loss of income.] The effects were obviously the most on the poor and vulnerable people living in both rural and urban areas. But it did not spare the middle class either.

### **Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on hunger and access to food in urban and rural communities**

#### **Rural people**

**Kurigram** in northern Bangladesh is known as a poverty-prone district because of frequent river erosion and lack of employment opportunities. Most of the adult men are seasonal migrants to other districts for agricultural and industrial works. The farmers could not manage to keep seeds of the crops due to the flash floods that occurred 5 times in 2020. As a result of this, people are apprehensive of an impending food crisis in the coming months. Many poor people, who used to work in Dhaka or other large cities, have now returned and are working as rickshaw pullers or CNG? auto-rickshaw drivers.

People who used to work at hotels or restaurants, or used to run small businesses such as grocery shops, have now been living in utterly miserable condition as many of them have been compelled to live off their savings during the pandemic when they had no work.

*“We all have heard saying the health ministry officials, World Health Organization and other non government organizations that people need to eat healthy and nutritious foods during this time of the pandemic to build strong immune system. But the food supports and rations that the govt. and other organizations are providing is not sufficient for that purpose. There were corruptions regarding the distributions of the relief cards as well as the dealerships of the rationing activities have been awarded to the people based on their political allegiance. So instead of rescuing the marginalized people from the crisis, it turned out to be a lucrative opportunity for some unscrupulous people to make some quick money.” - Sayeda, an interviewee*

In Chilmari, Chakku Mia described the condition of the farm workers who used to migrate to other districts such as Chittagong, Dhaka seasonally to work for harvesting of crops. “We cannot not have two meals a day”, “We are spending the days with or without food”. Price of essential food items such as potato, vegetables has increased.

#### **Food in the hotels in Chilmari:**

In the eatery hotels for the common people, the food items have reduced per plate. Even if they pay they do not get enough items for the same price. Before COVID, breakfast included flour bread or paratha with pulses, lentils (dal) and mixed vegetables. The hotels used to provide free dal, only charge for the vegetables. But now, vegetables are less available, free dal is not available anymore. The size of the bread is smaller.

**Magura**, in the south western part, is known for commercial vegetable growing. Most people are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Various crops, particularly vegetables are supplied to the capital city Dhaka. But due to the recurrent torrential rain and flash floods, cultivation of vegetables and other crops has been damaged badly. Prices of all the vegetables have skyrocketed [on the one hand,] affecting the common people. On the other hand, farmers have incurred huge losses as a result of recurrent flash floods and sudden drought. These farmers have already suffered due to Lockdown including transport shutdown. They could not sell the winter vegetables.

Pregnant women of the poor and middle class families cannot afford nutritious foods as a result of this situation. This has increased the health risk both of the pregnant mother and the unborn child.

### Farmers facing a new reality!

A small survey was conducted by UBINIG during the last week of June, 2020 [to second week of July, 2020] in 17 villages in the three districts (Tangail, Pabna and Natore) on farmers about the cost of food and other sources of income. The findings showed that 97% of the farmers have stated that food price has increased, 66% have reduced food consumption, 49% have reduced the number of meals per day and 66% have reduced consumption of fresh vegetables and fruits. Even maintaining the farming operations became harder, for 85% farmers getting seeds and other agricultural inputs, and 87% farmers had difficulty in getting laborers, which was getting more expensive also. On the other hand, selling agricultural produce was harder for 97% farmers, the income from other non-farm sources reduced for 94% farmers and the ability to find off-farm was impossible for 100% farmers [UBINIG, 2020].

The seed beds have been washed away in the heavy torrential rains. Now though the government is providing support to these farmers but that is hardly sufficient and not all the farmers got that support.

### Urban people:

**Noakhali** is a small town in the southern coastal zone. The poor and the middle class people are passing their days in untold miseries amid the pandemic situation. Government officials are not that much affected by this situation since their income has not been affected by it. But people who work in private sector have primarily borne the brunt of this situation. Many employees of private organizations have been laid off as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the overall economy.

The price of the vegetables has increased exorbitantly. The vegetables price rose from Tk. 20-30 to Tk.100-120 per kg. In addition, the unpredictable climate resulting in sudden drought and/or flash floods has taken a heavy toll on the agriculture. This crisis creates a vicious circle. As the production cost of the crops rises, with it the prices of the agricultural products also rise. All these jeopardize the lives of the common people as they struggle to manage square meals for themselves and their families. The price of the vegetables has increased exorbitantly.

**Brahmanbaria** is in the middle of the country and in closer proximity to the capital. People are engaged in businesses, small and medium. Many people used to have businesses in Dhaka. Because of the pandemic, they have closed their shops in Dhaka and have returned home yet paying rent of the shops. Having no income they are facing the problems of food insecurity. They are struggling to manage two meals a day.

Many people lost their jobs during this time. Women, as domestic help, private tutors, newspaper hawkers, people from other professions who used to deliver services have lost their job too. The govt. ration cards for rice and other necessary food items are not distributed any more. [for distributing daily necessities.]

The foods they are having now seriously lacks proper nutritious value. People cannot afford food items like vegetables, potatoes, etc. as the prices of all these items have soared.

Most of these people are living off their savings they have managed to accumulate over the years. In many cases, the whole family is now dependent solely on a single bread winner, which has aggravated the overall dismal economic scenario of these poor families. People who have returned to the villages temporarily but still hold the rented house in Dhaka have to pay the rents and other utility bills every month. Many of them have months of arrear rents and bills to pay. Even cases have been found where people have been compelled to sell their lands to manage some money to survive amid this economic uncertainty.

**Tangail** is very close to Dhaka and is prosperous with different businesses and having people working overseas particularly in Malaysia. Now many families have returned overseas workers from Malaysia, garment workers from Dhaka, people in private services, and those in small businesses. The returned overseas workers are using their savings by investing in auto-rickshaw, those with low income are trying to engage themselves in agriculture. But due to flood, agricultural works were disrupted. The poorer people are offering to be wage worker, but without success.

### **New beggars in Dhaka city**

In a local mosque, usually (before Corona) on Fridays there were 2 or 3 regular beggars; during the Fridays of September-October the number increased to 25-30, a significant increase.

### **Income and food insecurity among the well-off and the “middle class”**

There is income and food insecurity among several groups of people who were considered as well-off having a regular source of income, and did not have to worry about the “three-meals” a day. They could cook food at home or could go out to eat. But COVID-19 pandemic has affected them all.

#### **Dhaka Middle class are quietly suffering**

Middleclass families living on good income jobs have faced significant reduction in their income. In Dhaka, there are more “To-let” signs on apartments. The schools for children are closed, so it is better for many families to go their homes of origin and at least save the house rent. Men stay back and share houses with other men at a lesser cost.

Although they do not want to reveal their conditions, the main features of the effects are seen in

- a. a reduction in their salaries to 60% or less during pandemic, and also the threat of losing the job in next few months.
- b. The tenants of their houses are leaving to lower rented houses, so there is reduction in monthly flow of income. Some have reduced the rent of the houses to retain the tenants.
- c. Cannot afford to keep driver anymore
- d. Have reduced the number of domestic helping hands
- e. Have reduced the expenditure on food that is not absolutely necessary. The food basket has become smaller.
- f. Have reduced medical check-ups
- g. Have increased orders for home deliveries for essential item
- h. Many have been compelled to take loans from others

There is significant change in the shopping list of the middle class families. Even in the food items there is decrease in those items which are not considered "essential". Fish, meat are alternately taken.

### **Overseas migrant workers**

The overseas workers were one of the food-secure groups. But after the pandemic many have returned. Initially they did not realize that the pandemic will be long lasting. They used their savings for food and other expenses. But after 7 months, it is becoming harder for them to manage. If they have to look for job, they need stay in Dhaka, but cannot afford the rent, not to talk about rising food cost.

### **Gendered dimensions of food access, production and consumption**

Women are finding it difficult to provide food to the family three meals a day. In Cox's Bazar, the loss of jobs of the male heads of family, and also unfavorable weather conditions to produce food, have caused a severe food crisis. The middle farmers were forced to mortgage their land while women in the poorer families who used to keep cows and goats, sold them at a lower price.

Over 70% of people in this union are not able to have three meals day; the food items in each meal also consist on only rice, spinach, dry fish, river fish (if they can catch) and vegetables (if available). Women who are doing home gardening are able to provide some vegetables to the families.

In Tangail and Pabna, women are reported to provide vegetables, eggs, poultry meat to the family food by producing vegetables in the homestead land. Even the poorer women used the roof of their huts for creeper vegetables such as pumpkin, sweet gourd, ash gourd, malabar spinach, etc. They are also collecting the uncultivated edible plants parts particularly offshoots and leaves of arum, tela kucha and senchi. They are collecting lotus stem for cooking. More than 60% of the rural families are



depending on these sources of food that is provided by women. During July to August most of the areas are flooded and often the water has retained over a long time. As a result many fish varieties have grown in this water which is accessible to all. Women and children are collecting these fish and adding to their daily meal.

## **Community-level initiatives in order to promote access to food and mitigate hunger**

### **Relief from government**

Amiyo worked in a hotel-restaurant in Dhaka and earned a good income and lived well with his mother and two brothers and sisters. His mother and his siblings also worked to add to family income. He lost his job during the Lockdown and all other sources of income were lost too. After much effort he could get access to food relief given by the government in the locality. The food included rice, potato and pulse and lasted for only 5 days. Now he is living on some casual works.

The family cooks once a day, mostly for dinner. Because of the high price of food commodities, the meal includes rice, dal (pulse) and some spinach.

Moriom worked as a cook in a jointly-shared house called "Mess", and earned well, but lost the job during lockdown the people living in the Mess left for their villages. She received some food relief but it was stopped. She got a job in a garden and was therefore able to eat twice a day. Her meal includes rice, mashed potato, spinach, vegetable; egg once in a while.

Shaymoli received government food relief once, 2 kilos of rice. Then there was no more relief. Now she does not have any work, as due to COVID housemaids are not allowed in the Apartments. After the opening of the Tea stalls she could work for washing the cups and plates, but the payment for such work is very low. Her daily food for one full meal includes rice, arum leaves, potato smash.

Milon was a apprentice Mason. After Corona he lost his job, but got another job cleaning a cowshed at Tk. 200 per day. This was good enough for him as he was almost going to be without any income. With this money he buys rice, spinach, potato and sometimes can manage to have poultry eggs.

The food relief provided to the poor and the needy people from the government and other non-government organizations was hardly adequate compared to their needs. Besides, the food items lacked the proper nutritious value.

The government relief was given for only once, with rice for a month. Different NGOs gave support to sex workers, marginalized people for three months, UNDP provided a support with 50 kilos of rice. In the Old part of Dhaka, a philanthropic person is offering food at a minimal price with rice, chicken, fish etc.

UBINIG provided support with food to 1275 families in 5 districts. The support items were in three categories, 1. The health protective products 2. Seeds for the farmers and 3. The food items. It was an emergency situation of pandemic, therefore, the affected people needed to be provided with health protective products such as masks, soaps for hand washing and washing powder for maintaining personal hygiene. One of the important principles followed in this support distribution was to buy from the farmers who were not able to sell the perishable vegetables and other agricultural products due to the suspense of the movement of transport and short duration of the markets. About 7 tonnes of food products, which were worth of approximately Tk. 196,689 was spent to buy from 57 farmers, which was an income for them. If those food items were bought from the market, the money would have been spent to the market, benefitting only a few big farmers or shop owners.

## **Conclusion**

The struggle of the people of Bangladesh is now to save lives from COVID-19 infection or to save their livelihood due to the shut down and slow down of the economy. Despite opening up of many sectors, the employment has not increased. The income has gone down, having a vicious cycle effect on other sectors. On top of this, this year had terrible climatic disasters of floods, untimely rains, drought, and even cyclone. The ultimate result is food insecurity and hunger among people, ranging from poor to the middle class.

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