



Briefing Note No. 1

(prepared for media briefing of Saturday 18 April 2020)

Background

The Partners of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh along with their associates are actively dealing with the annihilation and destructions unleashed by COVID-19. The Platform, established in 2016, currently comprises of more than 100 non-state actors and their networks and associates, including the private sector entities, non-government development organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), media activists, research centres and think tanks and other professionals.

Two of the Platform's Partner organisations started their works from the first week of January 2020, particularly through community radio, for improving awareness and sharing information on the crisis. Most of the Partners got engaged by middle of March 2020 in direct response against the pandemic.

The major areas of their entanglements (in order of importance) are the following: Awareness; Food security; WASH; Health; Education; Employment; Agriculture; Direct cash support; Shelter; Legal support; Transparency in relief distribution; Research and analysis; Transport to affected people; and Rehabilitation. One of the major roles of the Partners in this context had been establishing linkage between the government's initiatives and the target groups. A number of Partners also involved in COVID response activities in the Rohingya camps.

The groups of population (often overlapping) covered by these interventions are the following: Persons with disability; Girls and women; Communities in hard-to-reach areas; Children; Indigenous community; Daily wage-earners; Youth; Dalit community; Third gender community; Senior citizens/elderly people; Local administration/government; Floating communities and occupational minorities, such as sex workers, waste labourers, etc.

These activities are pursued in the following administrative divisions (in order of intensity of interventions): Dhaka; Rangpur; Chattogram; Rajshahi; Barishal; Mymensingh; Khulna; and Sylhet.

An initial estimate, based on the records of 40 Partner organisations, indicate a commitment of **more than BDT 600 crore** towards implementing short- and mid-term interventions to deal with COVID-19.

This document summarises the observations of the Partners of the Citizen's Platform, as well as those of the members of the Core Group of the Platform, derived from the experience of more than 100 non-state actors. These Partner organisations and their associates are intensively



engaged in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic at the grassroots level, across the country. The present briefing note seeks to elicit policy response towards the challenges that the non-state development actors are facing while undertaking their coronavirus-related activities. The document also highlights a set of perspectives of the Platform Partners demanding urgent policy attention for pursuing an effective anti-COVID-19 drive.

1. Impact of COVID-19 on SDG delivery

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the unfolding pandemic, along with immediate visible stress, is going to have far-reaching impact on Bangladesh's economic performance, social cohesion, environmental sustainability and democratic governance. There is high possibility that, as a result of this unprecedented pandemic, inequalities and discriminations may further heighten in the country. These trends may accentuate the entrenched vulnerabilities of the "left behind" citizens, frustrating the progress made by Bangladesh during the first cycle of (2015–20) of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Platform is positioning itself for a substantive assessment of the implications of COVID-19 for delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh. At the moment, it maintains that the current health and safety campaign, as well as the economic and livelihood support measures of the government and the non-state actors, need to be organised around the principles of the 2030 Agenda. The policy frame, derived from the 2030 Agenda, will be also useful for designing the subsequent strategy for national recovery and rebound.

2. Need for integrating the non-state actors in the government's anti-COVID campaign

2.1 The national strategy rolled out by the government to address the COVID-19 does not explicitly identify the non-state actors—including entities of medium and small entrepreneurs, labour groups, non-government development practitioners, rights activists, wide group of professionals including policy experts and media personnel—as a 'partner' in dealing with this national distress. These non-state actors, given their national-, sectorial- and grassroots-level presence across the economy and society, could be an effective interlocutor between the government agencies and the citizens. Although some interactions are coming to pass between the district/upazila and these organisations, there needs to be a policy announcement from the highest level in this regard. **A national-level mechanism may be set up, through necessary consultation (using video conferences), to address this aspect of strengthening the efficacy of the government's initiatives through enhanced collaboration with the non-state actors.**

2.2 The local government bodies and local administration need to be given explicit instructions and guidelines to cooperate with the activities of the non-state actors engaged in anti-COVID-19 activities, and provide adequate attention to the lists prepared by them of the underserved people in the locality. The local administration may also be advised that the non-state actors, including the research organisations, may be supported in their efforts to monitor and establish the transparency and accountability of the government's initiatives.



3. Aligning focus of interventions at the local level

There needs to be more appreciation on the part of the local administration regarding importance of various types of awareness campaigns conducted by the NGOs, along with distribution of food reliefs. Beyond awareness raising in the areas of using masks and sanitisers as well as social distancing, it needs to be appreciated by the local bodies that campaigns related to sensitisation in the areas of gender rights, child rights, challenges of adolescence, public safety, etc. are also important for sustainable change of the situation. The non-state actors may also point out the risk factors in the locality to trigger prompt action on the part of local government and administration.

4. Scaling up the anti-COVID intervention through partnership

While the NGOs are already doing their best in various areas in the fight against COVID-19, the efforts could be significantly scaled up if the government purposefully utilises them in a number of areas including the following:

- **Conducting health-related awareness;**
- **Raising awareness about the government-announced incentives;**
- **Preparing list of underserved people;**
- **Distribution of relief materials (food) at household level;**
- **Channelling cash fund to the vulnerable families.**

5. Increasing digital financial literacy at the grassroots level

Demand for money transfer through use of cell phone has increased tremendously under the present circumstances. Government has also decided to transfer the announced incentives directly to the intended beneficiaries through mobile money transfer. Government may urgently draw up a programme to take mobile banking literacy at the grassroots in collaboration with the NGOs through training and capacity building.

Due to urgency of reaching out to the vulnerable groups, the government may like to use the existing mechanisms like channelling cash support/stipends (students') using mothers' mobile accounts.

6. Purposeful use of community radios to reach out local citizens

There is a wide network of community radios across the country. This network, already in action, may be used further purposefully to raise awareness in the fight against COVID-19, promote understanding about the government announced measures, livelihood advice, emergency announcements, etc.



7. Reaching out to the underserved people

7.1 Field-level observations suggest that, notwithstanding the best efforts of the government, the certain sections of the vulnerable communities are once again being 'left behind'. Some of them do not have National Identity Card (NID); as a result cannot avail themselves of many forms of public support that are in place now, including cash transfer. Some of them are being deprived of government-announced supports as they receive a paltry sum under an allowance programme. Some of these people live in hard-to-reach areas. And some are excluded because of certain social stigmas. **There is a need for public policy clarity in these regards.**

7.2 These groups include those who do not have any secured living place—floating people (without any dwelling), pavement- and squatter-dwellers, slum-dwellers, etc. They also do not have NIDs.

7.3 The other group of people who are 'left behind', are the ones distinguished by their identity, including occupation. These include the *adivasis* (ethnic minorities) of the plainlands and the hills, *dalits*, people of the third gender, *hijras*, sex workers, *bede* people, artisanal communities and fisherfolk.

7.4 The persons with disabilities (physically and mentally challenged) are also often excluded from public support. Their access to awareness materials is also restricted as these are not produced commensurate to their abilities. It is important to get the food support delivered to the home of this special group.

7.5 People living in climate-affected regions are also 'left behind'. They include the people living in the *chars* and other remote places. People living in the *haor* area, where harvesting is about to take off, are also underserved.

7.6 Children living with foster parents who are without livelihood support at this moment.

7.7 Returnee migrants are harassed and shunned in their respective localities.

7.8 Elderly people without family and social support are also emerging as an extremely vulnerable group.

- **Working with the NGOs who have networks among these identified groups (e.g. the people without secured dwellings) will help the government in reaching out to these groups appropriately.**
- **The government has set up a number of bodies dedicated to the welfare of these vulnerable people (e.g. Jatiya Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation); however, these are visibly inactive at this moment. These organisations need to be effectively integrated in government's ongoing relief operation.**



8. Balancing saving lives with provision of livelihood

8.1 The paramount priority at this moment is saving lives. Science tells us that the most effective weapon in our arsenal is protecting ourselves through social/physical distancing. There is no scope to undervalue the protective distancing including quarantine, isolation and lockdown. The Platform and its Partners and associates remain committed to realising these life-saving measures.

8.2 Evidently, the protracted lockdown is creating serious livelihood challenges for a wide range of income-vulnerable groups. These groups include people dependent on daily income (e.g. construction workers and transport workers), laid-off workers from factories, returnee migrants, petty traders and informal sector entrepreneurs, small salary holders. One observes significant rise in unemployment, dissaving and distress sale by households/families dropping below poverty line. The financial incentive packages announced by the government are not coming to much use to them, as they do not have cash even to buy the 10 taka per kg rice, and are not comfortable to go out publicly for food given out as charity. **Currently, the so called (lower) middle class people are feeling the pangs of acute economic hardship.** The government needs to work out a targetted cash support infusion strategy to deal with this situation. The non-state actors can play a complementing role in operationalising such a strategy.

8.3 Due to total stoppage of transportation, there is a serious breakdown of the supply chains. The farmers (particularly in North Bengal) are the direct victims of this situation, as they are not getting proper price for their produce, while prices remain high in the markets of the capital. This is destroying the financial viability of the agri-enterprises, pushing them into indebtedness and poverty. The government needs to urgently organise secured convoy of (military) vehicles to restore these agri-supply chains, even if in a limited way.

8.4 The current approach towards microfinance may be reviewed in this regard, from the point of view of channelling funds in the rural economy. A number of upcoming economic activities (e.g. purchase of hides during Eid) would need financing support beyond institutional banking. Database development through the sectoral (private sector) trade bodies will be crucial in this respect.

8.5 Employment safeguarding, in the face of slowdown in trade and business, has become a critical issue for the private sector. Lack of data on micro, small and medium enterprises will create complexities in terms of ensuring access to the announced stimulus packages. The government needs to develop partnership with relevant and competent private sector bodies to reach out to these groups of entrepreneurs.



9. The emerging thunders

9.1 Protecting the frontline workers of the health service delivery system has to get utmost importance. However, it is noted that the health professionals such as paramedics, medical technicians, caregivers are often not getting due attention in this regard.

9.2 Within the unfolding misfortune, one witnesses the increase of domestic violence against women. While the help lines remain open, the shelter homes remain closed. **There needs to be specific directives from the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare to the local administration in protecting the victims in this difficult time.**

9.3 Concerns are being expressed that as result of the pandemic, school dropouts (particularly of girl students) will increase in the poor families; and so will child marriages, underage pregnancies and child labour. The government needs to take preemptive measures in this regard from now on. **The online classes provided through television, although of limited access, need to be more vigorously promoted.**

9.4 One of the fall outs of the pandemic is constrained access to basic food, particularly by the vulnerable groups. Greater incidence of malnutrition is being observed. There are concerns about a possible food entitlement failure of these people. The food security strategy needs to be revamped in view of the situation.

9.5 Apprehensions have been expressed that in view of the circumstances turned out due to lockdown, a certain section of the youth may get addicted to drugs and attracted towards terrorism. The government, in partnership with the CBOs, need to remain vigilant about such tendencies and take necessary counter measures.

10. Finance for the non-state actors

10.1 The activities of the NGOs are currently getting constrained due to lack of funds. This is particularly true for organisations that are not involved in delivering microcredits, small in size and located outside the capital. The microfinance would soon feel the liquidity stress as there is no situation to collect weekly/monthly installments.

10.2 A large part of the NGOs are dependent on external financing. They have currently restructured their programmes to deal with the exigency. The external funders were quite supportive about these programmatic reorientations. However, certain external funders, while acquiescing to health-related activities, are not allowing support to livelihood programmes.

10.3 The Citizen's Platform has always argued for setting up an *SDG Trust Fund* for the non-state actors. It has become all the more necessary for setting up such a facility urgently to deal with the pandemic and its aftermath.



11. Documenting experience, setting up a mapping mechanism and developing a social audit system

11.1 The Citizen's Platform is systematically documenting the activities of its Partners dealing with the fallouts of COVID-19. These records are allowing the Platform participants to assess the programmatic experiences and the institutional challenges faced by them. To facilitate mutual learning, the Platform's website is being regularly fed by these inputs (see: www.bdplatform4sdgs.net)

11.2 It has become very urgently necessary to set up a mapping system of the anti-COVID activities of the NGOs, so as to, among others, strengthen coordination, avoid duplication, reach out to risk-stress areas/communities, disseminate good practices and foster mutual learning. The Platform will take initiatives to promote such an exercise.

11.3 Given the huge amount of public resources being allocated for the marginalised and vulnerable population of the country, it is natural for the government to have an interest to know the level of efficacy of its initiatives. The Platform will strive towards setting up such a social audit system with participation of its Partners.