



Briefing Note No. 4

Experiences from the current situation at the grassroots level *Achievements and challenges*

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been four months since the COVID-19 unfolded in Bangladesh and its toll on the lives and the economy is rising. The government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been implementing various initiatives while non-state actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs), non-government organisations (NGOs) and private organisations are also contributing from their sides to tackle the unprecedented pandemic induced challenges. But the NGOs, particularly at the grassroots level, are also suffering from multifaceted challenges. In this backdrop, the *Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh* conducted a perception survey among the CSOs and NGOs operating at the grassroots level.

The survey findings were shared at a virtual dialogue among development activists, business leaders, researchers, academics, youth representatives, and journalists to discuss the emerging new challenges in view of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and outline policy recommendations. The keynote speaker of the dialogue was Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, Convenor of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Distinguished Fellow of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The Chair for the dialogue was Dr. Badiul Alam Majumdar, Country Director of the Hunger Project in Bangladesh who summarised the discussion and highlighted the key recommendations of the dialogue.

This Briefing Note¹ has been prepared based on the outcome of the virtual dialogue titled "Experiences from the current situation at the grassroots level: Achievements and challenges" held on 8 July 2020. It was attended by 80 professionals including development activists, business leaders, researchers, academics, youth representatives, and journalists who are actively engaged in dealing with the COVID-19 induced challenges across the country. Participants from 30 Partner Organisations of the Platform, of which 19 are based outside Dhaka, attended the event and shared their

¹ This briefing note is the fourth one of the Platform's briefing note series on COVID-19. The [first briefing note](#) was published at a virtual media briefing on "Strengthening Effectiveness of the Non-State Actors' in COVID-19 Response Activities" on 18 April 2020, and [the second](#) one was published on 14 June 2020 which was prepared based on a virtual dialogue titled "Post-'General Holidays' Health Risks" which was held on 1 June 2020. [The third](#) one is yet to publish and based on another virtual dialogue on "New Challenges for SDGs and Budget 2020-21" which was held on 18 June, 2020.



views. The event was streamed live on the Platform's website and social media for wider audience engagement. The event was viewed by more than 2,600 people.

This document presents cluster-based scenarios on new challenges of this pandemic for different marginalised communities and development stakeholders. It also outlines sectoral issues related to the SDGs. These findings will be useful for formulating effective strategy for coordinating and managing the pandemic induced challenges in the country.

2. SUMMARY OF THE KEYNOTE

2.1 Context

Given the current context of the COVID-19 situation, Citizen's Platform took the initiative to conduct a local level survey based on a structured questionnaire, during 4-6 July, 2020 for this dialogue where the respondents were mainly from outside of Dhaka. There were a total of 94 responses from 89 local organisations located in over 33 districts of Bangladesh. A country mapping was prepared based on the responses which show the coverage of the respondents from all over Bangladesh. It can be used as a representation of recent activities and the experiences faced by grassroots NGOs during this pandemic. As these grassroots organisations remained in the shadow for so long, the main purpose of this dialogue is to convey the main discussions and recommendations from these organisations to policy makers efficiently.

2.2 Alternative sources of income of grassroots level organisations

As the pandemic hit, the CSOs and NGOs faced major difficulties in operating their activities at the local level due to inadequacy of resources. When asked about alternative sources of income (for example, microfinance, social business, etc.) to cope with this sudden catastrophe, it came out that 54 per cent had alternative sources of income while the other 46 per cent did not. Thus, almost half of the local level organisations lacked financial capacity to support themselves during this ongoing pandemic. Microfinance was found to be the major alternative source of income for these organisations. The other noticeable sources of income which came up from the perception survey include personal, social, local and international donation and collection of fees for conducting educational and training programmes.

2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on activities and experiences of grassroots organisations

Since the pandemic unfolded in Bangladesh from March 8, grassroots organisations have been very active at their local communities. About 91.5 per cent respondents distributed different kinds of aids among the local community people during this time. The other important activities include – coordinating with the local government to



distribute government aid and services including food and cash to help the affected and vulnerable community people; preventing violence against women and children which alarmingly increased during the lockdown period; providing health care services, maintaining social cohesion and an active flow of information with the help of various means of communication; providing masks for local community people; and setting up hand washing units. They also contributed significantly by working towards establishing justice in the local level, dealing with natural disasters like floods and Cyclone Amphan in the coastal areas.

The survey also revealed the constraints and challenges that these grassroots organisations faced in conducting the aforementioned activities. Financial constraint was central among them. Majority (about 90 per cent) of the survey respondents expressed that there is lack of liquidity of money. They needed it to deliver these community level activities. Maintaining social distance properly while implementing the activities and inadequacy of safety equipment for field level employees were key challenges. Additionally, there are also natural disasters taking place, for example, flood in North Bengal and Amphan in coastal areas, which further exacerbated the current pandemic situation. This double disaster situation imposed extra burden on these organisations and their activities. They had limited opportunity to work on these disasters due to the pandemic. There often exists challenges of non-cooperation from local administration and unwanted intervention of local influential people. Lack of flexibility in using project aid and means in dealing with COVID-19 was also highlighted as a notable challenge.

3. ISSUES ADDRESSED AND DISCUSSED – DISTRICT WISE REPRESENTATION

To present the specific issues and experiences of a specific region, the Platform selected a number of key speakers who represented their regions and demonstrated their experiences during the pandemic.

3.1 Service delivery and associated challenges

Echoing with the survey findings the dialogue discussants from the South region highlighted the crisis of SDG funding since the beginning of the pandemic. Many projects of local level organisations (in collaboration with donor agencies) have been stalled due to maintaining social distancing in the field level operations. As a result, many field level employees of these organisations lost their jobs. Also initiatives have been taken to make arrangements for the stakeholders to work on virtual platforms. But they were not digitally prepared to adapt to this new arrangement for problems in internet connection or lack of proper electronic devices. Due to social distancing protocol,



discussants from the South could not contribute much during Amphan since they were unable to send their employees and field enumerators in the field.

Furthermore, sorting out the correct information regarding COVID-19 had been a challenge for these grassroots NGOs. Since COVID-19 is a new kind of disease and there was little knowledge about it initially, there were a lot of misinformation and rumors. So it was difficult to collect authentic information and disseminate among general public. To deal with this challenge, the grassroots organisations created awareness raising audio commercials on how to adhere to hygiene rules and presented them to public using community radios.

3.2 Overall activities and support for LNOB and Rohingya groups

The local organisations have worked with local administration in unison while they were also active in other socio-economic activities. Based on the deliberations of the speakers it came out that these grassroots organisations ensured that incentive packages and support programmes of the government were accessible for all levels of people, including transgender community, musical community etc. and also efforts were made not to leave any group of people behind. These local and grassroots NGOs also contributed to Prime Minister's relief fund and Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) fund, in the form of financial, food and other supports. Many NGOs and organisations were involved in distribution of health kits, soaps, PPEs, and different devices. They also provided the local vulnerable community with cash support, took initiative for awareness building programmes in slums and hard-to-reach areas. Special attention was also given to visually impaired persons and Rohingya camps. For example, in Chittagong they put special focus on visually impaired persons by creating digital talking book for them. Furthermore, these organisations tried to work with the government in times of Cyclone Amphan in the coastal areas. The delivery of emergency relief supplies to the Rohingya habitation has not been compromised at all. Rather, efforts have been made to distribute food reliefs through integrated initiatives of local and district administration, and to ensure health care in the Rohingya camps. They also worked with international NGOs, NGO Affairs Bureau and PKSF to combat this pandemic.

3.3 Cooperation with the local government

The local government authorities including local administration, Union Parishad, City Corporation all worked in a synchronised order. The local administration distributed government incentives and other aid and relief packages to remote and hard-to-reach areas by collaborating with local and grassroots NGOs. For example, about 10 out of 100 organisations in Barishal worked directly with local administration in times of COVID-19 and Amphan to help the local community cope with this double disaster.



However, the discussion also shed lights onto some disquieting aspects. For example, issues such as less cooperation from government administration and lack of proper adherence to the health safety protocols were particularly highlighted by speakers from Barishal region. But it was mentioned that the police super at district level in that region is putting a great effort to maintain public awareness through disseminating proper information. However, while people are advised to take shelters in the shelter centres in times of natural disasters like Amphan, in case of COVID-19, where community transmission imposes threat to lives, taking shelter in these buildings remains an issue of debate. Moreover, the number of tests per day is very low due to shortage of the testing kits which makes the situation even more complex. In addition, local arbitration is not possible due to social distancing, and it is being done at a very low rate.

There is lack of coordination between local administration and central government in their specific areas. It was thus recommended to establish a coordination cell with the leadership of Prime Minister to create the bridge between government authorities and the private development organisations who are working at the grassroots level.

3.4 Child marriage and education

The rate of child marriage increased dramatically during this lockdown period due to lack of close observation from local administration as well as NGOs. The online education curriculums also faced major setbacks since 85 per cent of the local students do not have a smart phone while many of them cannot afford to buy internet packages. So these schools and colleges had been deprived of online classes as a result of this 'digital divide'.

3.5 Special attention for the LNOB group

Recent studies show that violence against women and children increased alarmingly during the pandemic. It was recommended that the donor community should channel their funds to the grassroots youth and women-led organisations, as they are directly working with the vulnerable groups at the grassroots level. Government incentives for Adivasi and Dalit community, persons with disabilities are very crucial during this crisis and discrimination towards these groups needs to be addressed. Persons with disabilities need to be more involved in the decision making process of the central government as they are more aware of the necessity of the aforesaid groups. Additionally, the transgender community faces a lot of social problems. They often become victims of bullying and teasing. They are mostly refused from receiving any incentive or aid packages from different organisations during this pandemic.

3.6 Media exposure and recognition

Field level activities of the grassroots NGOs are not being featured in the media properly. As a result, they are not getting proper recognition for their contribution



towards local community. Therefore, it becomes essential to feature their work more extensively in the local newspapers and media.

3.7 Law and justice

It was mentioned during the open floor intervention that amidst the pandemic, the government released around 30 to 33 imprisoned accused persons but the fines were not waived. It was thus recommended to waive the fines for these released persons and to initiate virtual courts for all the courts in Bangladesh rather than some selected courts if the activities of actual court are not going to start soon.

3.8 Other selected issues from different regions

Health sector in the South region

COVID-19 is imposing adverse effects on health, economic situation as well as on political aspects of the country. In case of Barguna, inadequacy of health services was cited as the most prominent problem. During this season of flood, the victims and their families could not take shelter in the neighbourhood due to coronavirus. However, taking shelter in the government shelter houses increased the risk of transmission of the disease. Citing the recent health sector report, the discussants highlighted that 20 per cent of the government doctors do not have postings yet. Moreover, the community health complexes are devoid of doctors, and local people cannot access the health care facilities at this very crisis moment. Every hospital should have special corner/space for disabled. Necessary measures should be taken by local administration to enhance the number of testing of coronavirus patients. Additionally, mobile medical team needs to be established to provide health care facilities to local community people. There also had been no coordination between local administration and central government which needs to be addressed properly.

Agriculture and harvest in the North East region

People involved in agriculture are facing problems in harvesting their agricultural outputs. Although the paddy cultivation had been good, there was scarcity of labors to collect the grains due to the pandemic and lockdown measures.

Poor and ultra-poor groups in the North East region

According to a survey conducted in Moulvibazar and Sunamganj by Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB), the income of poor and ultra-poor people decreased by 80 per cent during this pandemic. People from the lower income group received help from different government and private development organisation projects but still it was only adequate for two weeks. These poor people had been coping with this crisis by cutting down from three to two meals a day and cutting down other consumptions.



Delivery of incentive packages in the Char areas

The participants from the char areas argued that government incentive packages had not been reaching to the char areas adequately. This makes the situation more difficult for the flood victims. Allocating incentive packages for flood affected people was highly recommended by the participants.

4. INTERVENTION BY THE CORE GROUP MEMBERS

The members of the core group expressed their concern for lack of NGO coordination. Therefore, a nationally established coordination cell is highly needed at this moment for policy dialogue and coherence.

The owners of the very small businesses were the hardest hit group by this pandemic. Their supply chains were heavily disrupted and their products are not being purchased for which their income source is jeopardised. To recover from this situation, a rural level database is necessary. A coordinated comprehensive rural level database with proper identification by national ID cards could help to reach these very small business holders through designated rural banks including PKSF.

Meanwhile, NGOs need to be more proactively involved in health related initiatives and measures to spare more lives in this pandemic. Non-state actors need to operate in a coordinated way as well. To this end, there remained concerns that multiple reporting of the same problem or event might inflate the actual situation and misguide the government.

5. INTERVENTION BY THE CHAIR

The chair presented his own opinions regarding the involvement of grassroots NGOs and development organisations and their important role to fight against this pandemic. He drew the example of Kerala's local level coordination to fight the pandemic and recommended that Bangladesh should learn from the example.

Although there are a lot of field level work going on to deal with the pandemic, most of them lack the coordination between government and the local level organisations. While appreciating the address of other important issues, he pointed out the absence of the issue of spreading misinformation and propaganda in the discussion which is an alarming issue during this pandemic. It is essential to be more cautious about propagandas and raise awareness to tackle this issue. Moreover, two very important things need to be considered – one is to hold the government responsible and accountable for their spending, for example, in Korea the general people held the



government accountable for their actions. Another is freedom of speech which has also been violated during this pandemic.

Three special 'C's which refer to – communication, coordination and community engagement were mentioned. Communication ensures the dissemination of information to all levels. This, in turn, impacts on people by bringing change in their behavior. From the perspective of communication, again, three 'W's are important to remember. These include: wearing masks; washing hands; and watching in distance to reduce the transmission of coronavirus. He further illustrated that according to experts, to recover from any pandemic or epidemic, 80 per cent of the population of a country depends on social determinants of health whereas the remaining 20 per cent depends on the health infrastructure that exists in that particular country. Thus, it is important to bring change in our behavior and daily habits, abide by the health measures and ensure own safety and health measures to overcome this pandemic.

Community engagement is necessary to battle against COVID-19. Since the virus is already in community transmission phase, it is important to break the chain of community transmission by building community awareness and placing someone in charge of leading the activity. For example, in Kerala the local government took the initiative for community engagement programme. A local level community needs to be created to engage all the stakeholders and beneficiaries for proper dissemination of information as well as implementing activities.

Religious propaganda is very prevalent during this pandemic. The government can handle the situation by including all the religious leaders into the community engagement initiatives and take their opinions into consideration. Finally, social mobilisation, property rights of the local community and proper communication as well as behavioral change are the main driving factors to fight against the pandemic.

6. CRITICISMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The representatives from the grassroots NGOs were not invited or part of the decision making process of central government or even local administration. These grassroots organisations want recognition of their contribution at the community level through proper dissemination in media, so that general people get to know about their contribution towards society. It was pointed out that while the NGOs supported the government-led initiatives and food distribution, the government did not involve these NGOs as active partners in the overall process of those initiatives. These grassroots NGOs therefore need to be unified to be properly functional and to get more acceptance of the local authority.



Organisations which do not have any alternative income sources, i.e. microcredits, citizen's rights based activities etc., are in dire need of support of the incentive packages from government. If they are not backed up by incentives, then the employees of these organisations will lose their jobs and become unemployed in the middle of this global crisis.

Recommendations came for long-term cooperation and incentives for the industry owners who suffered the most from the pandemic. Necessity for supporting the activities of NGOs and keeping them involved in policymaking activities also came up from the discussion. Other specific recommendations include: paying special attention to the visually impaired and disabled persons and their special needs in this crisis moment; ensuring non-discriminatory health care for all classes of people; addressing the inadequacy of health care system; eliminating violence against women and children; halting increasing rate of child marriage; raising the standard of education; and taking necessary measures to reduce unemployment for which national and local level coordination is very much needed. Necessary steps needs to be taken to strengthen advocacy for the left behind groups to give them voice and power of being heard.

After reviewing all the responses from survey respondents and the discussion from the speakers, we came into conclusion with three specific set of observations. These include:

- a. NGOs, active at the local level had not been involved in government policies and strategies during the critical period. In this context, it is necessary to adopt a policy-strategy at the national level and implement it quickly at the local level. Local peoples' representatives need to be ensured and the local administration needs to be involved in a conscious and effective manner.
- b. The development agencies at the grassroots level are playing an important role in implementing the SDGs and in upholding the rights of the left behind citizens in particular. Therefore, it is very important for the government to provide financial assistance and policy support for them to survive in this time of disaster.
- c. During the ongoing crisis, these development agencies have conducted and are carrying out extensive activities at the local level. They are also playing an important role in the delivery of government programmes. Their positions at the grassroots level have so far received little national recognition. Even in the media, their activities are not adequately featured and disseminated. This lack of information flow needs to be addressed on an immediate basis.



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Annex

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