

Citizen's Consultation Meeting Sylhet

A Brief on Development in Sylhet

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1. Division Overview

Sylhet division is the second smallest division in Bangladesh, with a land area of 12635 km² and a population of over 11 million people according to the preliminary 2022 Population and Housing report. The division is located on the north bank of the Surma river at the eastern tip of Bengal, bordered by three Indian states. It consists of four districts, Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, and Habiganj. The division is known for its tea gardens, gas fields, tourism, and fisheries.

2. Outlook

2.1 Achievements

The poverty rate in Sylhet, measured by the upper poverty line was 16.2 per cent in 2016, which is less than half of what it was in 2005(33.5). The overall reduction in poverty was driven by substantial decrease in rural poverty rate. In the aforementioned timeframe, rural poverty decreased by 20.5 percentage points to 15.6 percent, but urban poverty increased slightly by 0.9 percentage points. In 2016, only Dhaka district had a lower poverty rate than Sylhet.

The monthly nominal income in Sylhet increased by almost a quarter from Tk. 11629 in 2010 to Tk. 14305 in 2016. The division had always had a higher income than the national average, but in 2016, it fell to the lower half of the distribution; this was not the case in 2010.

Unemployment rate in Sylhet (3.6 per cent) was lower than the national average of 4.2 per cent of unemployment. Among the divisions, this was the third lowest rate of unemployment. However, female unemployment was more than double male unemployment in the division. Urban unemployment rates were higher than rural unemployment rates in the division, with female urban unemployment rate reaching almost 11 per cent.

Sylhet has always been successful in preventing early pregnancy. In both 2013 and 2019, proportion of women aged 20-24 years who gave birth before age 18 was the lowest among all 8 divisions. The rate was almost 10 percentage points lower than the national average (24.2 per cent). Stunting of under-5 aged children decreased drastically by over 25 per cent over 2013-2019, but it was still the highest rate amongst the eight divisions in 2019.

The proportion of children whose births have been registered by a civil authority had more than doubled between 2013 and 2019, from 35 per cent to 72.3 per cent. The 2019 rate was significantly higher than the national average (56 per cent) and was the highest among all eight divisions.

2.2 Challenges

Despite having the lowest rate of informal employment amongst the eight divisions, the rate was still high at 79.3 per cent. The rate of female informal employment rate was 86.3 per cent which was 9 percentage points higher than the male informal employment rate. Informal employment in the division was concentrated in the rural areas at 81.2 per cent (1.9 percentage points higher than the divisional estimate) with 87.6 per cent female informal employment and 79.2 per cent of male informal employment.

In 2019, Sylhet was behind the national average (82.6 per cent) of primary school completion rate by 4.2 percentage points. The division had the second lowest primary school completion rate across all the divisions. However, it had increased by almost 7 per cent compared to 2013, whereas the national average increased by 4.2 per cent. **Sylhet was also significantly behind the national average (29.4 per cent) of upper secondary school completion rate by 7.1 percentage points,** the lowest among the eight divisions.

The proportion of households using safely managed drinking water services in Sylhet was lower than the national average by 1.5 percentage points in 2019. The proportion was 46.4 per cent, lower than that of Rajshahi and Rangpur.

Sylhet was also below the national averages of improved sanitation. In 2019, 79.5 per cent of households used improved sanitation which was the lower than the national average of 84.6 per cent. This places Sylhet again in the bottom half of the eight divisions, ahead of only Barishal.

3. COVID Management

As of 21 June 2022, 65 per cent of the population in Sylhet received the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccination; the rate was among the lowest in the country, better than only Barishal division. The rate was slightly lower than the national average (69.78 per cent) by 4.78 percentage points. The proportion of population with complete vaccinations was also significantly lower than other regions, and below the national average.

4. Flood Implications

4.1 Impact

Sylhet was hit with the worst flood in decades starting on June 15 2022. As of August 2, 2022, 76 individuals in Sylhet lost their lives. 33 upazillas in Sylhet district have been affected by the flood, with 13 and 11 upazilas being affected in Sylhet and Sunamganj alone. UNICEF reported 7.2 million people being affected by the flood, with 3.5 million of them being children. Over 450,000 people have been reportedly evacuated to safety centres. This is more than double the 209,875 people who were reportedly affected by floods in region in the previous year.

The Sylhet City Corporation has estimated that the economic losses incurred amount to over Tk 1100 crore. They estimate that Tk 40 crore worth of crops, Tk 403 crore worth of damages to roads and highways, and losses in the fisheries sector worth Tk 22 crore are the biggest economic damages from the floods. Moreover, they state that 38 of the 52 river protection dams in Sylhet were damaged. 1704 ha of Boro fields, 1600 ha of Aush fields, and 1471 ha of vegetable fields were estimated to have been destroyed. 2305 metric tonnes of fish, 2.13 metric tonnes of fry are stated to have affected 15,613 fishermen in the region. 72km of roads are also stated to have been damaged, with an estimated 5 to 20 crore allotment necessary for immediate repairs and further Tk 75 crore required for permanent repairs.

4.2 Response

The government has responded to flood through the Department of Disaster Management, who has so far contributed slightly upwards of 2 crore taka and 1300 metric tonnes of rice to Sylhet and Sunamganj. They have also distributed upwards of 55000 packets of dry food in the area. The military was deployed to handle crisis management, and there continues to be a military presence

in the area. However, questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of the government response. Old issues regarding the implementation of relief have been raised, as there are concerns that the aid is not reaching the intended targets effectively. Moreover, there are concerns regarding the composition of assistance provided, as there are complaints that a more people-centric and needs-based approach needs to be taken. For example, there have been calls to provide sanitary pads and medicine as assistance. From the administrative side, upazilla committees have been formed with government officials, union parishad chairmen, local political leaders, health officials, police, and other locals in order to successfully implement the relief schemes that the government has undertaken. These committees are currently preparing lists to assist in providing targeted interventions and coordinating the logistics of providing aid.

4.3 LNOB Implications

The long-term implications of the Sylhet floods on LNOBs in the region shall be difficult to overcome. More than 600 educational institutions in the district have been submerged. Massive learning losses that have been incurred in the region. School-going children in the area, having already dealt with two years of COVID, are now having to deal with further lost years of schooling. More than 11,640 tubewells, 1.15 lakh latrines and 6.5km of water supply lines in the area have also been affected, causing concerns for public health and sanitation. Moreover, the impacts of climate disaster on gender-based violence, child marriage, school dropout rates is well documented. Beyond relief, long-term rehabilitation and recovery from these events will require adequate funding, efficient implementation, and strong monitoring. The three-pronged attack of the post-covid recovery, global economic crisis, and climate disaster does not bode well for LNOBs in the region.

5. LNOB Perspective

5.1 Haor Regions and Other Geographic Challenges

The 4 districts of Sylhet have a combined 217 haors, amounting to 48.87 per cent of total area. The majority of haors are concentrated in Sunamganj and Sylhet. The unique geographical characteristics makes these regions a risk for flash floods. Excess rainfall and subsequent runoff, sedimentation in the rivers, deforestation and hill cuts, landslides, improper drainage, improper planning of road and water management infrastructure, and the effect of climate variability all combine to exacerbate the effects of these flash floods. These haors support fisheries and boro rice, but climate disasters lead to major economic losses for those who are economically dependent on these areas.

Sunamganj district had the highest level of poverty, and its residents suffered from the lowest levels of nutrition in the division. In 2016, poverty rate was 19.3 per cent which around 50 per cent higher than the national and divisional averages. Sunamganj also had the highest rate of stunting amongst children aged below 5, 44.2 per cent of children suffering, compared to the national average of 28 per cent and the divisional average of 27.6 per cent.

Habiganj district had the lowest proportion of households using safely managed drinking water and sanitation facilities. In 2019, only 30.3 per cent of households used safe drinking water which was lower than the national (47.9 per cent) and divisional (46.4 per cent) averages.

Moulvibazar district had the highest level of income inequality and lowest agricultural wages in the division. The Gini coefficient for the district was 0.433 in 2016. However, this was still lower than the national average of 0.482. The district also had the highest infant mortality rate, at 45.71, compared to the divisional average of 41.55. Moulvibazar district also had the lowest daily average wage rate of agricultural labour, with the male wage rate being 405tk and the female wage rate being 300 tk, compared to the national average of 402tk and 305tk respectively.

Sylhet district had the highest level of under-5 infant mortality rate in the division; 34.1 compared to the national average of 27.6. However, the district had the highest adult literacy rate in the division, 78 per cent, compared to the national average of 75.6 per cent.

5.2 Women

In 2019, proportion of early marriages and child births was the highest in Sunamganj compared to other districts of the division. 10.5 per cent of women aged 20-24 years were married before 15 years with the proportion being 8 percentage points higher than the division average (7.3 per cent). However, the figure stood below the national average of 15.5 per cent. The proportion of early child births (percentage of women aged 20-24 years who gave birth before age 18) in 2019 was also the highest in Sunamganj, standing at 22.4 per cent compared to the divisional average of 14.8 per cent.

In terms of maternal health care, Habiganj had the lowest rate skilled births. 21.7 per cent of women aged 15-49 years undertook complete antenatal care in 2019 which was lower than the division average by 8.3 percentage points. The proportion of women whose birth was attended by skilled professional in 2019 was 43.5 per cent in Sunamganj and 43.9 per cent in Habiganj, compared to the divisional and national averages of 48.4 per cent and 59 per cent respectively.

5.3 Children

Habiganj lagged behind the other districts of Sylhet division regarding completion of primary and upper secondary education. The district also had lowest rate of primary school completion of per cent; lower by 7.1 percentage points than the divisional average and 11.3 percentage points than the national average. The percentage of upper secondary school completion was also the lowest in Habiganj in 2019 (22.2 per cent), just below the rate in Moulvibazaar. The rate was lower than both the divisional and national averages.

Sunamganj, had the highest level of child labour in the division. The amount of children aged 5-17 who were involved in child labour in 2019 stood at 8.2 per cent, which was more than double the amount in Sylhet(3.6 per cent) and above the national and divisional averages of 6.8 per cent and 6 per cent respectively.

5.4 Adivasi and Minority Communities

Sylhet has a strong indigenous community consisting of various ethnic groups including Garos, Manipuris, Tripuris, Hajong, Sawtal, Orao, Munda, and Bhumij. A large portion of indigenous communities are employed in tea gardens and involved in agricultural activity in the region.

5.5 Employees of Tea Gardens

There have long been concerns that the standards of living of employees in tea gardens are poor. To this end, the government has included in the social safety a net an allowance of 5000 taka per head per month to improve the living standards of tea workers. However, this amounts to merely 25 per cent of the country's GDP per capita. Moreover, longstanding issues such as targeting of recipients and implementation of aid, as with most social safety net allocations.

6. Other Local Issues

6.1 Tea Industry

Sylhet is home to 135 tea estates and gardens, which combine to help Bangladesh produce 3 per cent of global tea. Domestic demand for tea is estimated to be growing somewhere between 3 and 5 per cent each year. However, the tea industry in the region is currently facing an investment crunch, with 16 per cent of land in tea estates reportedly becoming economically unviable. The low yields caused by ill-maintained land is leading to calls for government intervention to undertake the necessary rehabilitation and strengthening measures to increase yields.

6.2 Gas Fields

Sylhet district is home to multiple gas fields that provide gas directly to the national grid. The latest gas field was discovered in Kailashtila earlier this year. The discovery is going to provide 29 extra mmcf of gas. However, the current gas shortage in the country stands at 3600 mmcf, compared to the supply of 2950 mmcf.

6.3 Remittances

Sylhet district also receives strong amounts of remittances from abroad, with the average remittance received by households 10 per cent higher than the national average, behind only Dhaka district.

6.4 Fisheries

Haor regions provide economic opportunities to fishmongers. However, with the recent flooding, a significant amount of fish have been washed away. The flood has induced losses of Taka 140 crore, affecting Sylhet's annual cultured fish output of 75000 tonnes.