

Combating COVID-19 in Rural Bangladesh: The Role of the Local Government

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Summary

As one of the most densely populated countries in the world, Bangladesh is severely vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, health security is a great challenge and it has now been further intensified under the present circumstances. Despite the government announcing several packages to help the poor, implementation has not been effective due to the lack of coordination in the local administration. This is further stymied by undue influence of local government officials, nepotism and corruption, resulting in misappropriation of relief funds for the poor rural dwellers. The government has shown zero tolerance towards the accused masterminds under Section 34 (1) of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009. However, this pandemic requires proper disaster management planning through the integration of the various activities at the local and national levels.

Introduction

Countries all over the world are struggling to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and Bangladesh is no different. Being one of the most-densely populated countries in the world, it is already struggling to provide basic healthcare infrastructure to its people. The global pandemic has posed a far greater challenge for the country. While Bangladesh has done well in responding to this crisis, as it has with many past disasters, one cannot ignore the fact that the number of COVID-19 infections has been on a rise in the country during the recent days. Currently, the virus has killed more than 100 people, with over 2,948 infections.

Starting mid-March 2020, but more purposefully from 25 March 2020 onwards, Bangladesh has been mounting a major effort to raise awareness and persuade people to be socially responsible and physically distance themselves. The government's disaster management capacity is being utilised, with local bodies particularly the Union Parishad, playing an active role to effectively manage the COVID-19 emergency response.

National Preparedness and Response Plan

The National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, Bangladesh (Version-5), prepared by the Directorate General of Health Services of the Ministry of Health and Welfare in March 2020, is aimed at preventing and controlling COVID-19 and reducing its impact on the health and well-being of the people as well as on the economy of the country. The primary objective of the plan was to prevent the entry of the disease into the country and, in case of importation, to prevent or limit local transmission. To facilitate planning and identifying the response levels, six country levels have been identified according to COVID-

19 infection status. Under each level, a risk assessment would be conducted to determine, maintain and change the response level. In Level 1, there is no case in the country; in Level 2, there are imported cases; in Level 3, there is limited local transmission; in Level 4, there is widespread local transmission; in Level 5, there is decrease in transmission; and the last stage is the recovery phase.

The country is to implement the activities under a national plan through committees from the national to the Upazila (sub-district) levels, with multi-sectoral involvement representing the relevant ministries, national and international organisations and development partners. The plan includes a mechanism to develop surge capacity to manage patients, sustain essential services and reduce social impact. The response strategy and actions would be continuously reviewed and adjusted as necessary to ensure the efficient use of financial and human resources for an effective response to the outbreak.

Home Quarantine and Social Distancing: A Challenge in Rural Bangladesh

To ensure that the 'stay at home or home quarantine' is a success, it is important to ensure at least a month's supply of food for low income individuals already living in villages. The government, with the support of the local administration, has been jointly identifying low income people living in these areas and providing food to them until the situation gets better. The Bangladesh army remains on the field to help the civil administration ensure social distancing and bolster the Coronavirus preventive measures at the grassroots level. The Bangladesh police is constantly working to discourage unnecessary public gatherings so as to ensure the prevention of the spread of Coronavirus.

The most effective way of keeping people at home in rural Bangladesh is through the proactive support of Union Parishad (rural council), the lowest tier of local government. The colonial pattern of administration in local government has resulted in officials working at the Union Parishad level as being bureaucratic and alienated from the people. The unequal economic structure tends to influence the local bodies. As a result, the local government cannot render proper service to the people. Besides, the presence of local elite dissuades the general public from participating in the local government, which results in a less-effective local administration.

There are 13 representatives, including the chairman in each Union Parishad. For the sake of rural security and peace, usually one village policeman is deployed in each village and one office-bearer leads all the members appointed in a union. According to the media, most of the people in home quarantine in different Bangladesh villages are non-resident Bangladeshis, who have returned from many different countries. Meanwhile, there are allegations that many in home quarantine have been disobeying government orders and moving from one place to another. If the Union Parishad representatives can monitor the house quarantine with the help of the village police, the infected villagers can be prevented from spreading the deadly Coronavirus. However, it is a struggle to convince villagers to maintain social distance and to stay at home.

Misappropriation of Relief Aid: Zero Tolerance is Necessary

While announcing a 31-point directive to combat COVID-19, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina warned that no corruption would be tolerated in the relief distribution and advised on appropriate usage of personal protective equipment. She also stressed that attention should be given to law and order, and all the government officials, including that of the Health Services Division, the administration, the law enforcement agencies and the Armed Forces Division would have to work in coordination with one another. Despite her strong warning, in some cases, the undue influence of the chairmen of the Union Parishads and the ruling political parties, muscle power, nepotism and corruption have resulted in the misappropriation of relief for the poor rural dwellers in Bangladesh. The government has taken strict action and local public representatives who have been involved in misappropriation of relief aid have been suspended under Section 34 (1) of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009. Such a zero-tolerance policy by the government is necessary across all levels.

Activation of the Union Disaster Management Committee

The Coronavirus pandemic is more severe than any form of natural disaster and can only get worse. Keeping this reality in mind, the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) at the Union Parishad level must be activated to render the best possible support to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could be minimised through proper disaster management planning and by integrating disaster management activities with local and national development plans. It is apparent that effective coordination is an essential ingredient for disaster management.

Bangladesh has gained credibility and repute across the world for effectively managing disaster. The government has taken several significant steps during the last few years in building up institutional arrangements for effective and systematic disaster management. To maintain proper coordination and functioning amongst the concerned ministries, departments, line agencies, local government bodies and community workers, the government has formulated a set of top-down mechanisms from national to grassroots levels. The UDMC can facilitate relief coordination under the leadership of the Upazila administration. It can work to raise funds at a local level to support the poorest people under its jurisdiction. It can help targeting the most deserving people such as marginalised farmers, daily labourers, fishermen, rickshaw and van pullers, building workers and low-income employees in private sectors for relief aid.

The government has been taking measures to manage the pandemic and to prevent an extremely adverse impact on the economy. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced an assistance and stimulus package of Taka 72,750 crore (S\$11.95 billion) on 5 April 2020. This was followed by an additional package on 13 April 2020, raising the total financial package to Taka 95,619 crore (S\$15.71 billion). This includes the safety net expansion package of Taka 6,859 crore (S\$1.12 billion) for both the rural and urban areas.

The UDMC must ensure that the locals are kept informed and are capable of taking practical measures to reduce COVID-19 risk at the household and community levels as well as to

widely disseminate the success stories of reducing associated risks among the local people. The committee must work closely with the local institutions, volunteers and people in a way that they can help and motivate people to stay at home maintaining social distance. It will contact the local health office to train students, youth, local club members and volunteers on community-based Coronavirus preventive initiatives.

The Way Forward

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been leading from the front, taking special measures to help the underprivileged. Private-sector organisations and individuals have also been coming forward to help people affected by COVID-19. Meanwhile, isolation centres can be created within the Union Parishad complex and volunteer teams should be formed under each Union Parishad for emergency response. Attention must be paid to overcoming deficiencies through political and administrative action. No negligence or dithering at any level should be tolerated. The UDMC members must disseminate a uniformed message to the effect of "wherever you stay, continue to fight against Coronavirus. Everyone should stay at home and keep yourself clean on a regular basis". Lastly, the aim of effective humanitarian coordination must be to ensure the best use of resources, which must reach people living in the rural areas who are most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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